

THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS
OF FIRST YEAR TEACHERS
A
PROJECT

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By

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Abstract

Attrition rates among beginning teachers have long been a cause for concern. As a profession, teaching is one that is extremely difficult to enter into and find your footing. For most novice teachers the first year of teaching is typically the most difficult due to the challenges faced both in the classroom and personally. During the day a myriad of decisions fall on the shoulders of a teacher and long after students have gone most teachers are continuing to make decisions about the classroom. This project examines the major areas where decisions are being made, charts the decision-making process first year teachers employ, and presents an electronic guidebook that can be used by individuals transitioning from a pre-service program into their first year of teaching.

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Introduction and Statement of the Problem

There is a large body of research that indicates novice teachers are not, and cannot be fully prepared for the rigors of teaching. This is not an indication of a universally poor system of teacher preparation, but rather an acknowledgement that teaching requires a particularly complex set of skills, knowledge and unique disposition. Many studies have been designed to examine the development and concerns of beginning teachers, but there are few studies that examine the decisions beginning teachers make in order to overcome their concerns, or the decision-making process they employ.

A teacher is thought to progress through five stages of development over their career, starting as a novice, moving to an advanced beginner, then to competent, then to proficient and finally expert (Berliner, 1994). It is during the novice stage of development, defined as a teacher with fewer than three years of teaching experience after having obtained their initial teaching license, that the teaching profession loses between 40-50% of beginning teachers (Ingersoll, 2001). Through the study of beginning teacher concerns, researchers have strived to provide an understanding for teacher educators and administrators in order to decrease attrition rates within the ranks of beginning teachers (Melnick, S. A., & Meister, D. G., 2008). However, while researchers have extensively identified the concerns of novice teachers, little research has been conducted to examine the decision-making process implemented by novice teachers to address their concerns.

Research Questions

The purpose of this project is to provide teachers, who are transitioning from a teacher preparation program into their first year of teaching, with a guidebook featuring the common

areas of concerns during the first year of teaching, and provide a set of resources to aid with the decision-making process relative to those areas. The questions explored in this study include: 1) What are the primary areas in which a novice teacher has to make decisions? 2) What resources can and should a novice teacher draw from when making decisions? 3) How should a novice teacher evaluate the validity and usefulness of resources when making decisions?

Through research and personal reflection, I will identify a limited number of areas of concern that are most often faced during the first year of teaching, and create a guidebook for individuals transitioning from pre-service into their first year of teaching. The guidebook will contain information regarding the decision-making process, sections that specifically address each major area of concern, and resources related to the area that may be useful in the decision-making process for future first year teachers.

Personal Interest

When I completed my pre-service program I still had many unanswered questions ranging from big picture questions such as, “should I be a classroom teacher or put my knowledge to use in a different way?” to small detail questions like, “which book should I read on the first day of school?” The transition from a pre-service program to the first year of teaching is typically new uncharted territory for beginning teachers and it can feel overwhelming. As a first year teacher you are constantly asked to make decisions that directly impact your day-to-day world. Some of the decisions you feel confident making because you have prior knowledge or experience that lends itself to making an informed decision, while other decisions you might feel unprepared to make.

When faced with a decision-making scenario, in which I had very little background or experience, I turned to outside resources. I often found as a first year teacher that I would need to

make a decision regarding a large topic, but felt that I did not know where to begin. With so many decisions needing to be made and no starting point, it would have been wonderful if I had a guide that offered a starting point for making a decision.

The second phase of this project was derived from the realization that once I had started down a decision-making path and was seeking outside resources there was a flood of information. There are many books, websites, podcasts, videos and more targeted towards first year teachers. This sudden plethora of information can itself be overwhelming when you are looking for resources pertaining to a question you are trying answer. The second part of this project, the resources section, strives to tap the flow of information relevant to an area of concern and provide suggestions for how to vet resources.

Literature Review

Attrition rates among beginning teachers have been reported to be as high as 50% within the first five years of teaching, a bleak perspective for a new teacher (Ingersoll, 2001). Many of the situations faced during the first year of teaching require a level of understanding not yet developed in beginning teachers (Hammerness, K., Darling-Hammond, L., & Bransford, J., 2005). It has been noted that, “no other profession takes newly certified graduates, places them in the same situation as seasoned veterans, and gives them no organized support” (Le Maistre, C., & Paré, A., 2010). Given these understandings regarding the stressful situations that a new teacher enters into, what types of decision-making processes do novice teachers make in order to cope with the pressures of teaching?

Formation of Beginning Teachers

Increasingly, teacher preparation programs are working to address the issue of high attrition rates among novice teachers (defined as teachers with fewer than three years of teaching experience). The education community has recognized that “the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for optimal teaching are not something that can be fully developed in preservice education programs” (Hammerness et al., 2005). Based on this understanding and previous research, many pre-service programs have incorporated some form of mentorship to encourage collaboration among new and experienced teachers (Gratch, 2001; Kagan 1992). These mentorship programs have taken on various forms including: partnering a preservice teacher with an experienced classroom teacher; pairing a first year teacher with an experienced teacher in the same building to; school districts providing mentoring support through professional development (Kagan, 1992). Through mentoring and the creation of learning communities (Hammerness et al., 2005; Le Maistre et al., 2010), pre-service teachers are able to gain an approach to knowledge development known as the “knowledge *for* practice” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). The “knowledge *for* practice” is described as the development of knowledge relating to subject matter content, learning theories, pedagogy and teaching strategies (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). When developing their knowledge *for* practice, preservice teachers are working to gain an understanding of the content and teaching strategies necessary to developing their practice (Hammerness et al., 2005; Nolen, S., Ward, C., Horn, I., Campbel, S., Mahna, K., & Childers, S., 2007). This concept of teacher development illustrates the ways in which pre-service teachers begin to create a foundation on which they can base their professional decision-making (Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S.L, 1999; Hammerness et al., 2005).

Along with the development of a knowledge base, pre-service teachers also begin to form their identity as a teacher (Nolen et al., 2007). Pre-service teachers base the formation of their

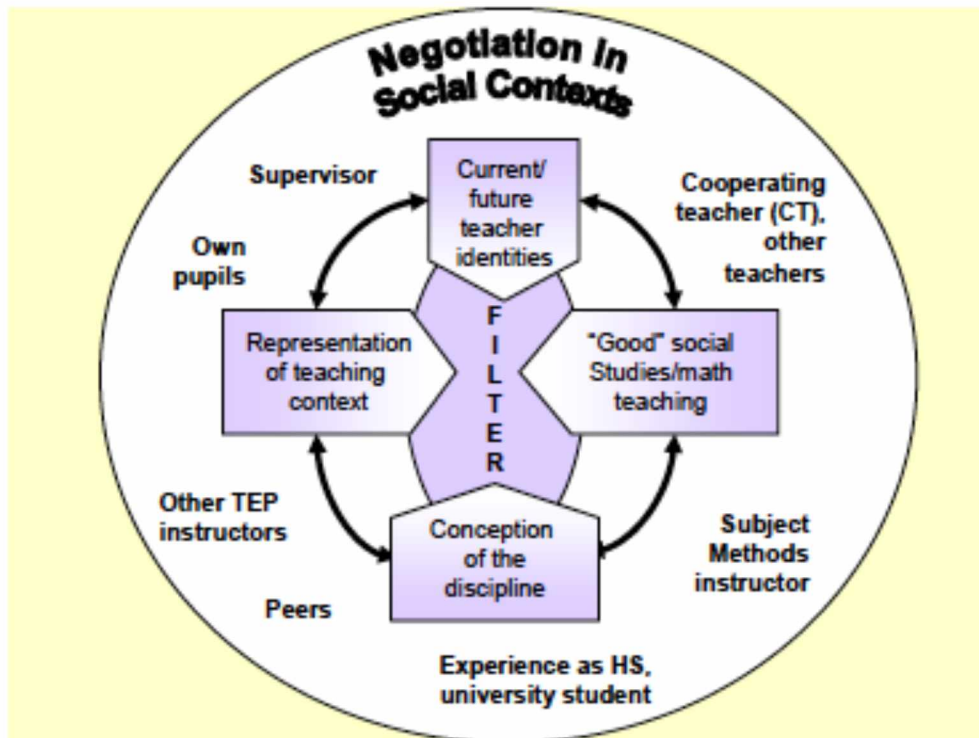


Figure 1. The outer ring includes individuals who influence novice teachers, while the inner circle represents internal/personal influences (Nolen et al., 2009).

initial teacher identity on their own experiences as students, their ideas of an ideal teacher, the formal course work presented in their pre-service program, and their mentor teachers or field experiences (Nolen et al., 2007; Kagan, 1992; Horn, I. S., Nolen, S. B., Ward, C., & Campbell, S. S., 2008). The overall formation of teacher identity influences the way a novice teacher makes decisions (Horn et al., 2008; Nolen et al., 2007). Hammerness et al. (2005) noted, “identities teachers develop shape their dispositions, where they place their effort, whether and how they seek out professional development opportunities and what obligations they see as intrinsic to their role.” In Figure 1, Nolen et al. (2007) depicts the filters that a pre-service teacher uses to make decisions. The outer portion of the circle includes individuals and personal experiences that

influence a pre-service teacher's decision-making. For each decision a pre-service teacher makes the influences in the outer circle may or may not factor into the decision and is relative to the nature of the decision being made. The inner circle contains the methods a pre-service teacher uses to filter an idea and make a decision, known as the "utility filter" (Nolen et al., 2007). Unlike the outer circle, a pre-service teacher uses all of the components in the inner circle to make a decision. The arrows indicate that the components are independent of each other, however they are connected, and changes in one component might lead to changes in another. As a whole, Nolen et al. (2007) presents a visual way to explain the influences and filters used by a pre-service teacher to make decisions.

Concerns of Novice Teachers

The discord between the expectations of beginning teachers and the reality that beginning teachers face is often cited as a reason for novice teacher attrition (Le Maistre et al., 2010; Horn et al., 2008). Moir (1999) discusses the stages of development that a first year teachers passes through; anticipation, survival, disillusionment, rejuvenation and finally reflection. The anticipation phase comes before the start of the school year, sometimes towards the end of pre-service, and is noted by excitement and enthusiasm for teaching. During the survival phase, which occurs during the first six to eight weeks of school, first year teachers are learning at a rapid rate and are often feeling overwhelmed and stressed. Disillusionment occurs when a first year teacher is faced with low morale, impending evaluations and parent/ teacher conferences. First year teachers enter the rejuvenation phase after winter break when they have had an opportunity to de-stress. The final stage of reflection happens just before the end of school when a first year teacher realizes the end is in sight and begins planning for the following school year.

During the survival stage first year teachers are often bombarded with a plethora of decision-making situations (Le Maistre et al., 2010). Saaty and Katz (1990) describe a method of hierarchical decision-making that is undergone when intuition alone is not enough to make a decision, a process they call the analytic hierarchy process (AHP). Individuals break a down large problem into smaller and smaller subcategories until they are able to make a decision in one subcategory. Once a decision is made in a subcategory that information is used to inform the decision-making process in the next higher subcategory. The AHP “organizes perceptions, feelings, judgments and memories into a framework that exhibits the forces that influence a decision” (Saaty & Katz, 1990). We can imagine this method of decision-making in the classroom when a first year teacher is faced with an issue of classroom management, specifically student behavior. Following Saaty and Katz (1990) AHP, the first year teacher will need to break the topic into smaller and smaller subcategories until she is able to make a decision in a subcategory. The decision made in that subcategory will then inform the next higher subcategory. Figure 2 charts the decision-making process using AHP in relation to developing a classroom management plan.

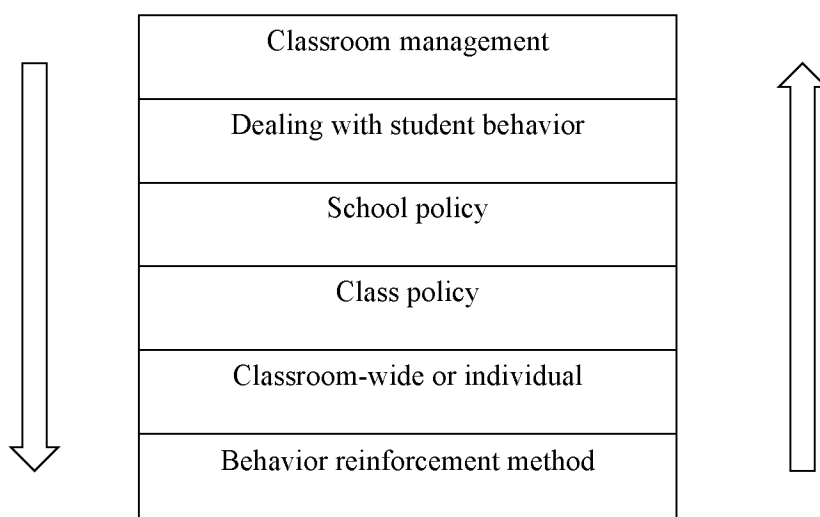


Figure 2: Using the AHP method to make a decision regarding classroom management.

Starting from the lowest subcategory in which the teacher can make a decision (behavior reinforcement method) and moving up until she has addressed the larger issue of classroom management. While the method of AHP is applicable to the decision-making processes in the classroom, it is important to note that first year teachers often lack the experience and background necessary to adequately inform their decision-making process, and consequently must constantly make adaptations their decisions (Hammerness et al., 2005).

Veenman (1984) analyzed eighty-three studies to identify the most serious problems faced by novice teachers. The top eight concerns of novice teachers included; classroom discipline, motivating students, dealing with individual differences, assessment, relationships with parents, classroom routine, lack of materials and supplies, and dealing with individual student behavior (Veenman, 1984). Based on Veenman's (1984) study, Melnick and Meister (2008) identified three themes, or areas that novice teachers reported being their greatest areas of concern including; behavior and the diverse needs of students, time constraints and workload, and communication with parents. In both studies novice teachers cited these areas as areas of concern because they felt ill prepared to make decisions in the categories (Melnick & Meister, 2008).

Traditional Support Provided to Novice Teachers

In order to enter the teaching profession most individuals must complete a set of university courses, successfully complete an internship or student teaching experience, and be certified to teach. During this time individuals, or preservice teachers, are in what can be described as a "student bubble" because during their practicum, "they are protected by their supervising teacher who can step in if the situation warrants" (Le Maistre et al., 2010). As Loughran, Brown and Doecke (2001) describe, "issues and likely concerns are able to be

highlighted but not fully addressed as teacher preparation cannot duplicate the reality of the actual world of beginning teaching.” There are many forms of professional literature designed to assist novice teachers when bridging the gap between their preservice preparation and their first year of teaching. Three widely used books will be discussed in this section. All address some of the eight areas of novice teacher concern identified by Veenman (1984).

The first text is an educational best seller with more than three million copies sold and one that is often recommended to novice teachers entitled “The First Days of School” by Harry Wong and Rosemary Wong (Wong & Wong, 2009). The book is designed to walk novice teachers through a series of activities and units that result in a novice teacher becoming effective. Wong and Wong (2009) identifies an effective teacher as one who “1) Has positive expectations for student success, 2) Is an extremely good classroom manager and, 3) Knows how to design lessons for student mastery.” When examining Wong and Wong’s (2009) book in comparison to the eight concerns outlined by Veenman (1984), Wong and Wong addresses six out of the eight concerns. The two areas Wong and Wong (2009) do not address are interactions with parents and how to acquire lacking materials or supplies. The book focuses heavily on what the teacher does within the classroom and seems to exclude externalities.

The second text, “The First Six Weeks of School” by Paula Denton, is part of a larger series, *Responsive Classroom* a research- and evidence-based program developed by The Northeast Foundation for Children (Denton, 2000). The program is designed for both novice and experienced teachers, with the overarching goal being that an entire school or district adopts the *Responsive Classroom* model. Denton’s (2000) book outlines a systematic approach to the first six weeks of school. Denton (2000) also addresses many of the top eight concerns of novice teachers as outlined by Veenman (1984), but like Wong and Wong’s (2009) book, Denton’s

(2000) book is also lacking a discussion on interactions with parents and how to acquire materials and supplies that might be lacking. However, when looking at the overall *Responsive Classroom* program it should be noted that there is an entire book devoted to parent/teacher communication.

The third text reviewed is one that has been adopted on a district level in the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District (FNSBSD) entitled “CHAMPS A Proactive & Positive Approach to Classroom Management” by Randy Sprick (2009). Much like Wong and Wong (2009), Sprick’s (2009) book is designed as a step-by-step manual to walk teachers through developing a plan for practice. Sprick (2009) includes worksheets for teachers to reflect on or think about different areas of their practice. When reviewing the content of Sprick’s (2009) book in relation to the eight areas of concern outlined by Veenman (1984), Sprick addresses seven of the eight areas with the exception of the lack of materials. Sprick includes an appendix especially for first year teachers, which is the only section to briefly discuss the issue of parent communication.

All three texts address the majority of novice teacher concerns Veenman (1984) identified. While these texts provide a framework or a how-to approach for novice teachers, they each only offer one set of options and answers. As discussed previously, novice teachers face a plethora of situations that require decisions be made and problems solved, sometimes on the spot, including deciding which guidebooks for new teachers to read and which parts of them to follow or ignore.

Facing Decisions as a Novice Teacher

Along with professional literature for teachers there is also a body of literature about the experiences of first year teachers written by first year teachers. One selection by Esmé Codell

(1999) entitled “Educating Esmé Diary of a Teacher’s First Year” paints a realistic portrait of the concerns and numerous decisions novice teachers must make throughout their first year. Woven throughout Codell’s book are descriptions of the concerns she has and the different filters that influence her decision-making process. In one passage Codell (1999) explains how she plans to address classroom discipline, the top concerns for novice teachers: “Solving conflicts: 1) Tell person what you didn’t like. 2) tell person how it made you feel. 3) Tell person what you want in the future. 4) Person responds with what they can do... I learned this from a Jewish guy my age I observed teaching...” (pg. 23). From this passage Codell discusses one way she addressed classroom discipline and the source that influenced her decision-making. When examining Codell’s decision using Nolen et al.’s (2007) diagram of Negotiation in Social Context (figure. 1), it is evident that her decision regarding classroom discipline was influenced by what she had seen used successfully by another teacher. Codell later describes the influence that her coursework, mentor teacher, and personal instincts also had on her decision regarding classroom discipline.

Unlike professional literature, Codell’s (1999) book touches on all eight concerns faced by novice teachers. Her story depicts elements of transitioning from a preservice program to the first year of teaching that is not captured in research articles. The funny and sad stories found in Codell’s (1999) book illuminate the impacts of the decisions she made during her first year of teaching. As Kagan (1992) notes, “the life stories of teachers explain that the practice of classroom teaching remains forever rooted in personality and experience and that learning to teach requires a journey into the deepest recesses of one’s self-awareness, where failures, fears, and hopes are hidden.”

Statement of Bias

When considering this project it is important to note that, while working on it, I was a first year teacher who was facing many of the concerns discussed in the project. The idea for the creation of this project was conceived out of my personal need for answers to some of the challenges I was facing in my classroom. I am, however, not alone in the quest for answers to the myriad of decisions that must be made daily in the classroom. In order to avoid bias in this project I kept in mind that there are many other novice teachers who face different issues than those I encountered.

Another aspect of bias in this project was my approach from a primary education point of view. The decision-making processes that I outlined in my project may not be as relevant to intermediate teachers or teachers above the level of elementary school. In recognition of varying view points, I attempted to include options for modifications to multiple grade levels where it was relevant. Throughout the project I worked to keep an open mind about the concerns other novice teachers have faced.

Methods

Project Design

The goal of this project was to create a guidebook to decision-making for beginning teachers who are transitioning from an internship into their first year of teaching. The project focuses predominantly on elementary teachers who are transitioning into teaching in the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District (FNSBSD), although the guidebook may be useful to others.

The guidebook features seven chapters beginning with an introduction in Chapter One, followed by a discussion about decision-making processes and what influences or filters novice

teachers use to make decisions in Chapter Two (see Appendix B). A key aspect about novice teachers, especially first year teachers, is that their expectations and ideas of what teaching will be like often do not align with the realities of teaching (Kagan, 1992; Nolen et al., 2007; Horn et al., 2008). Chapters 3-6 in the guidebook are devoted to the top concerns identified by first year teachers. The chapters are: classroom management, curriculum, assessment, and communicating with parents. Within each chapter the larger topic is broken down into subcategories based on the AHP system of decision-making, and includes resources relevant to the topic, and some general suggestions or “pearls of wisdom” based on my experiences and the experiences of others.

To determine the top four areas of concerns for new teachers, I synthesized three research papers relevant to the topic and also compared the top concerns of first year teachers identified in the literature with my own personal notes on decision-making. I also reflected on anecdotal notes taken from conversations with a fellow colleague and first year teacher. From these sources I was able to establish the topics covered in the four chapters of the guidebook. The next step was the creation of a decision-making flow chart based on the AHP (Saaty & Katz, 1990). Input on the design of the flow chart was gathered from committee members and other novice teachers. The final aspect of the project, the resources section, was compiled from resources I found useful during my first year of teaching, as well as resources from other teachers.

Project Limitations

One limitation to this project was the point of view from which it was written. As noted I am synthesizing available research with my own personal experiences, which have been at a primary level and may differ drastically from the experiences other first year teachers. The goal of this project, however, was not to provide a quick answer for a first year teacher facing a barrage of decisions, but rather to provide a resource that can be utilized to break down those

unfamiliar decisions into recognizable parts. Input from my committee members and other first year teachers during the draft stage of development helped to broaden the relevance of the decision-making flow charts.

Another limitation of this project was the scope of resource to be included in the guide. Again, it was not the goal of this project to be all encompassing, but rather to provide a jumping off point for further investigation of other resources by first year teachers. The collection of resources included reflect my own discoveries and suggestions from my committee members. It is my hope that by sharing this guide with interns near the end of their student teaching, those transitioning into their first year of teaching will not feel lost or completely uncertain about the decisions they will make daily in their classrooms.

Reflection and Dissemination

If someone had told me when I began working on my masters that I was going to write a book it's likely I would have quit on the spot. I did not set out to write a book, but as I progressed through my internship year and then into my first year of teaching, I was faced with so many decisions that I had not foreseen or simply did not have answers to that decision-making became a major source of stress. Knowing that there were others facing similar issues and more first year teachers to come led me to think about ways to help the next group of teachers make decisions.

The project began by reviewing studies that outlined the top concerns expressed by novice teachers. Using a consolidated list of concerns from the studies, I then compared those concerns to the ones I had noted personally during my first year of teaching. The result was a list of the top four concerns, which in turn became the four main focus areas for the project and the handbook.

The second phase of this project was discovering a framework for decision-making. By using a structure for decision-making I was able to consider the concerns in the focus areas and address each one systematically. The resulting framework neatly outlines the focus areas and allows examination and discussion of those areas. For ease and accessibility the framework was incorporated into an interactive iBook that includes discussion notes based on my experience as a first year teacher and resources specific to each focus area that can be used for further investigation by the reader. The end result has been a guidebook to decision-making for first year teachers.

Plans for dissemination include making the guidebook available to students at the University of Alaska Fairbanks School of Education who are finishing their internship year. The digital nature of the guidebook allows it to be shared with a wide audience. However, the book is geared towards pre-service teachers in the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District. While I did not set out to write a book, that is the result of my endeavors, and I hope this one finds its way into the hands of those who might need it the most.

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Appendix A

Note Taking Worksheets

A: Focus Area- Classroom Management

1. Routines

a. Morning

What will the students be doing when they first come in? Will they be working independently or in small groups? Will students follow the same routine every morning or will it vary?

b. Snack/breaks

How often are students going to take breaks? How will bathroom breaks be handled? Will students have a snack break?

c. Transitions

How will students transition from one activity to the next? Will you have a routine transition for activities that happen daily (e.g. lunch, recess)? Will you have a universal signal to get everyone's attention?

d. End of day

How will students get ready for the end of the day? Are papers/ homework passed out at the end of the day? Will you dismiss students or will the bell? Will you differentiate between students who ride the bus and those being picked up?

Notes on Routines

2. Positive Discipline

a. Whole group

What will be your method for positive reinforcement for the whole class? Will there be specific times that the class can earn a reward (e.g. transition times) or can they earn them anytime?

b. Individual

What will your method for individual positive reinforcement be? How will students earn rewards? Will everyone be recognized daily, weekly, monthly?

c. Reward system

Will students individually or as a class be recognized for their efforts daily, weekly, monthly, or quarterly? What types of rewards can students earn?

d. Extreme behavior

Have you thought about what to do with a student who displays extreme behavior (e.g. non compliant, throwing chairs, running from classroom)? What is your schools policy? What other adult can assist when needed and how do you contact them? What are your boundaries for working with a student displaying extreme behavior?

Notes on Positive Discipline

3. Classroom Design

a. Whole group instruction

Where will you deliver whole group instruction? Is there more than one location for large group instruction? What resources will you need (e.g. whiteboard, document camera)?

b. Small group instruction

Where will small group instruction take place? What resources will you need close at hand?

c. Quiet work areas

Will you have designated "quite zones" or areas for working? Are quite areas for independent work or partners too? Will a quite work area also double as a "chill out zone" where students can take a break before coming back to the group?

d. Coat closet

How are you going to deal with outdoor gear? Will students need to hang their items in a specific order? Where will hats, gloves and smaller items go?

Notes on Classroom Design

B: Focus Area- Curriculum

1. Required Curriculum

a. Math

What math program has your school district adopted? Are there curriculum trainings being offered? Who can you ask if you have math specific questions? What materials have been supplied by the district/publisher? Is there a district or school provided pacing guide? How many minutes per day/ week are you required to teach math?

b. Science

What are you required to teach in science? What types of resources are available to you from the district, at the school, or within the community? How can you incorporate other subjects (e.g. reading, writing, art) into the science lessons? Who can you ask about science specific questions?

c. Social Studies

What are you required to teach in social studies? What materials have been provided? Are you able to include other subject areas into social studies (e.g. art, math)?

d. Art

What are you required to teach in art? Does your school have an art specialist? What materials are available for art projects at the district level or within the school? How can you incorporate other subjects into art?

Notes on Required Curriculum

2. Language Arts

a. Reading

What curriculum has your district adopted? Are you required to follow the curriculum or can you utilize other sources? How many minutes per day/week are you required to teach reading? What reading materials are available in your classroom, school, district, community? How will you structure your reading time to meet the needs of each student? Will students choose their reading materials or will you? How will you model reading and for what purpose?

b. Writing

What curriculum has your district adopted for writing? Can you use other sources? What are you required to teach in writing? How will you model writing?

Notes on Language Arts

3. Making it Interesting

a. Kinesthetic

What types of kinesthetic (movement) activities will you incorporate in the classroom? Will you have routine kinesthetic activities? How often will you have students moving? How could you include kinesthetic activities to help with transitions?

b. Materials

What types of materials will you create for your lessons? Are you creating something that could be found from another source?

c. Technology

How will you incorporate technology into the classroom? What resources are available? Are the activities done using technology reinforcing what has been taught in the classroom or are students learning from the technology?

Notes on Making it Interesting

C: Focus Area- Assessment

1. Required

What types of formal assessments are you required to conduct for the district or school? Will you include the formal and informal assessments in a final grade? How will you prepare students for the assessment? How will informal assessments guide your teaching practice?

2. Grades

How many grades will you include in each subject area? Are you required to have a specific number of grades in each subject? Will a project/ exam score be included in more than one subject area? In what format are you required to keep a grade book? Who can you ask with specific grade book questions? When are final grades due?

3. Frequency

How often are you going to assess student learning? What form will assessments take? Will students be able make corrections or modifications to their work after they are assessed?

Notes on Assessment

D: Focus Area- Parent Communication

1. Starting Out Right

How are you going to introduce yourself and your classroom to parents? How are you going to communicate your expectations for students to parents? What form(s) of communication are you going to use?

2. Conferences

What will parent/teacher conferences look like for you? Do you decide how long each conference is or is there a school policy? What norms are in place at your school for conferences? How are conferences scheduled? What will you be sharing with parents at conferences? Will you lead the conference or will students?

3. Tough Parents

What will you do when faced with an unhappy parent? Who can you talk to about difficult parent situations?

Notes on Parent Communication

Appendix B

Decision-Making in Your First Year: A Guidebook

The following pages contain a PDF version of the guidebook. You can find an iBooks version of this project online through iTunes using the search term “decision-making in your first year.”

Decision Making In Your 1st Year



By Isabeau Coskey

Acknowledgments

There are always many creative minds that help shape a project like this, and I would like to give a special thanks to a few specific individuals who guided me through this adventure. Thanks to my committee for taking the time to read everything and give thoughtful input; to Amy for being an exceptional mentor and confidant during my first year of teaching; to Angie who shared in this wild ride from beginning to end and is a true friend; and finally to Owen for being the main support for this endeavor and not allowing me to quit during the darkest days. There are of course many others who have been a part of this project in some fashion and to those of you (you know who you are) a heartfelt thanks!

Introduction



“You have to go wholeheartedly into anything in order to achieve anything worth having.”

- Frank Lloyd Wright

Congratulations! You have finished your teacher preparation program and you are about to have your very own classroom!

You are probably excited, but perhaps a bit nervous or unsure of how things will unfold during your first year of teaching. Don't worry! The good news is you are not expected to know everything. Teaching is one of the hardest professions to enter into because *even* after all your training and hours of study there are still going to be things you just don't know and can't prepare for. That is where this guide comes into play. It is my hope that through this guide you will be able to find answers or additional resources to help you through your first year of teaching.

Best wishes for your first year and congratulations on all your hard work!

Isabeau

Reaching for the stars in kindergarten



How to use this guide...

This guide is broken into four sections covering four areas that are typically of most concern to new teachers. I have called them “focus areas” and figure 1 provides a visual map of the four focus areas discussed in this book.

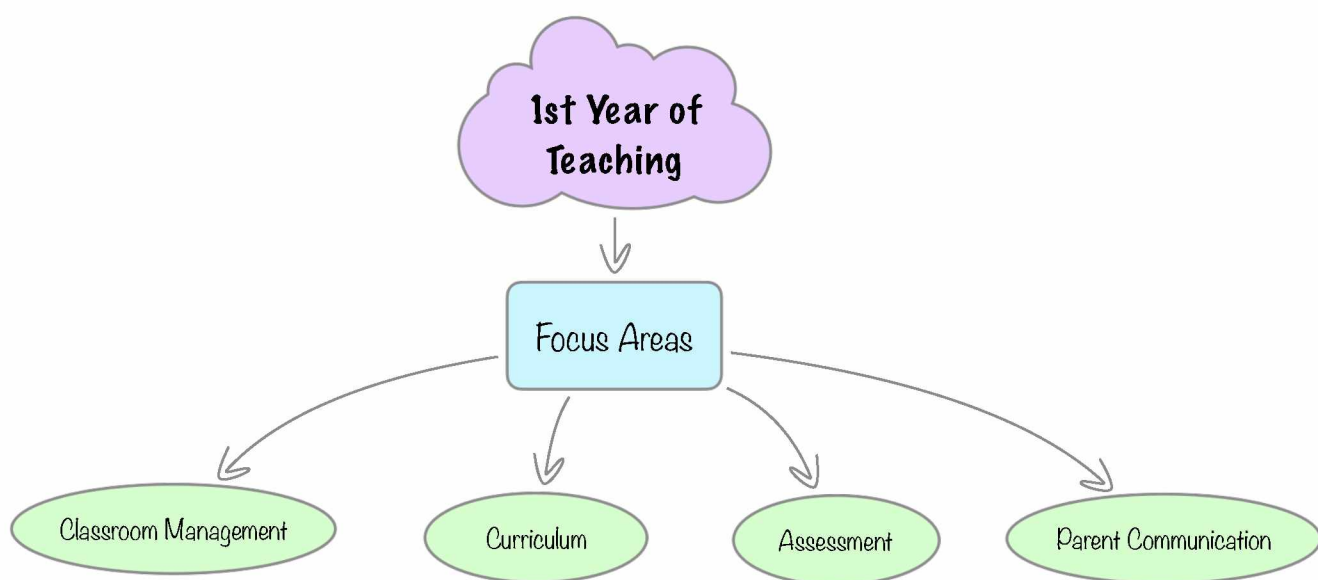


Figure 1: Decision Making Map

Within each focus area I have outlined some key topics to consider as a new teacher. When you click on a topic, a list of related questions appears to help you when thinking about the subject.

Along with the map, each section contains a list of resources relevant to the topic, a bit of discussion to provoke thinking on your part and a few pearls of wisdom gathered from those who have gone before you.

A quick note about selecting resources during your first year of teaching as the options can be overwhelming. Not all resources are created equally and striking a balance between quality of resource and efficiency in selecting a resource can be a learned skill. My advice is to find a publisher or online source you can rely on who has consistent quality. If you can find a few sources that you can depend on when in a pinch, you will have it made during your first year. You can always work on refining your list of dependable resources in subsequent years.

Finally, it is important to note that taking in this entire guide in one sitting is likely to give you a headache, especially when thinking about your own classroom. To help keep your thoughts organized there is a master note taking sheet that includes the questions from each focus area in the **appendix**. Take it slow and happy exploring!

Background on Decision Making



“It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are.”

-E.E. Cummings

Background on Decision Making

I have included here some background information on decision making, which is the foundation for this guide.

The discord between the expectations of beginning teachers and the reality that beginning teachers face is often cited as a reason for novice teacher attrition (Le Maistre, C., & Paré, A., 2010; Horn, I. S., Nolen, S. B., Ward, C., & Campbell, S. S., 2008). Moir (1999) discusses the stages of development that a first year teachers passes through; anticipation, survival, disillusionment, rejuvenation and finally reflection.

The anticipation phase comes before the start of the school year, sometimes towards the end of the preservice program, and is noted by excitement and enthusiasm for teaching. During the survival phase, which occurs during the first six to eight weeks of school, first year teachers are learning at a rapid rate and are often feeling overwhelmed and stressed. Disillusionment occurs when a first year teacher is faced with low morale, impending evaluations and parent/teacher conferences. First year teachers enter the rejuvenation phase after winter break when they have had an opportunity to de-stress. The final stage of reflection happens just before the end of school when a first year teacher realizes the end is in sight and begins planning for the following school year.

During the survival stage first year teachers are often bombarded with a plethora of decision-making situations (Le Maistre et al., 2010). Saaty and Katz (1990) describe a method of hierarchical

decision-making that can be used when intuition alone is not enough to make a decision, a process they call the analytic hierarchy process (AHP). Individuals can break down a large problem into smaller and smaller subcategories until they are able to make a decision in one subcategory. Once a decision is made in a subcategory that information can then be used to inform the decision-making process in the next higher subcategory. The AHP “organizes perceptions, feelings, judgments and memories into a framework that exhibits the forces that influence a decision” (Saaty & Katz, 1990).

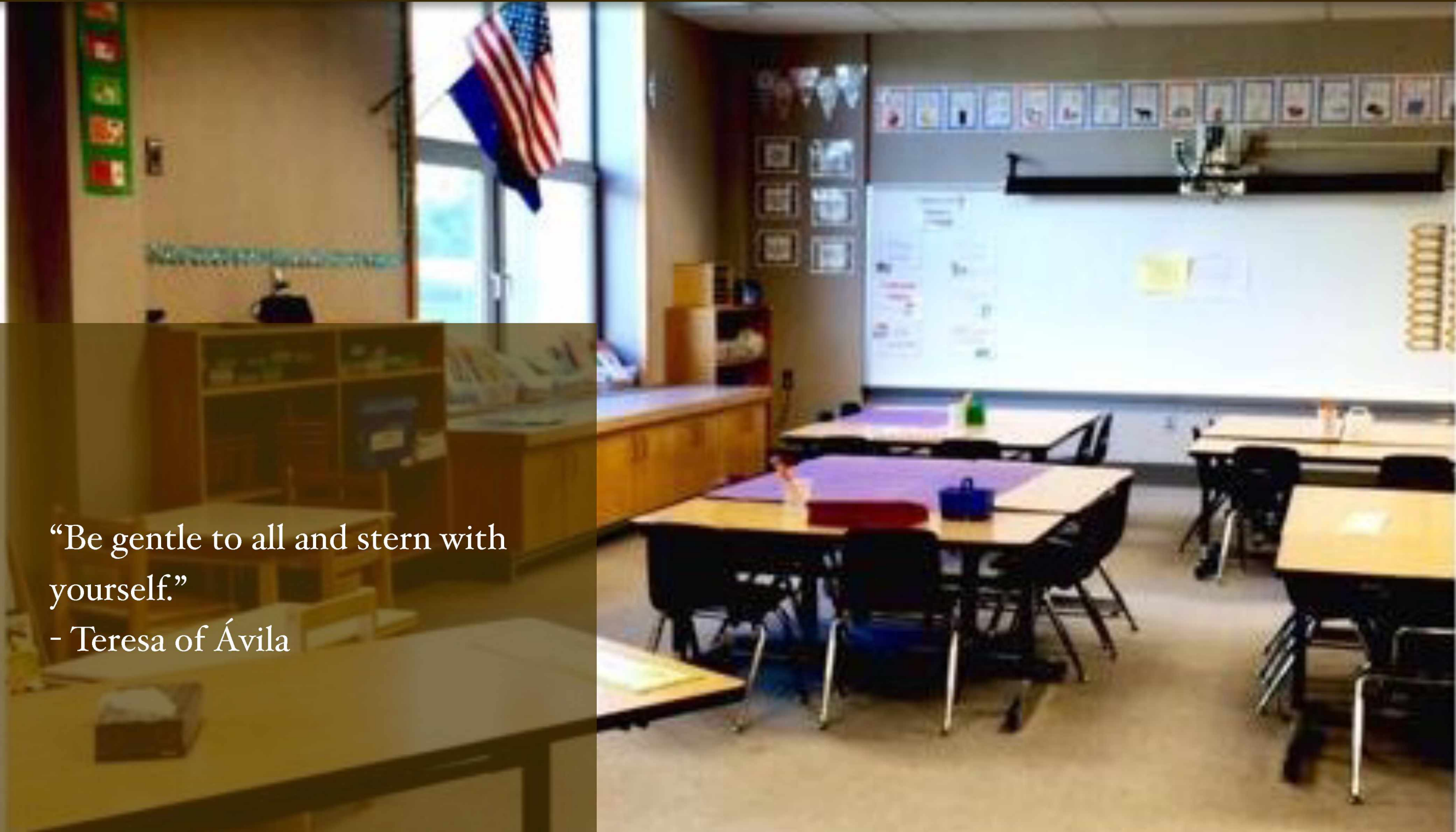
The AHP framework is used in this guide as a way to prioritize the areas of greatest concern for new teachers. These areas, or “focus areas” as they are called in the guide, often present the largest number of decision making scenarios for new teachers.

Chapter 3

Classroom Management

“Be gentle to all and stern with yourself.”

- Teresa of Ávila

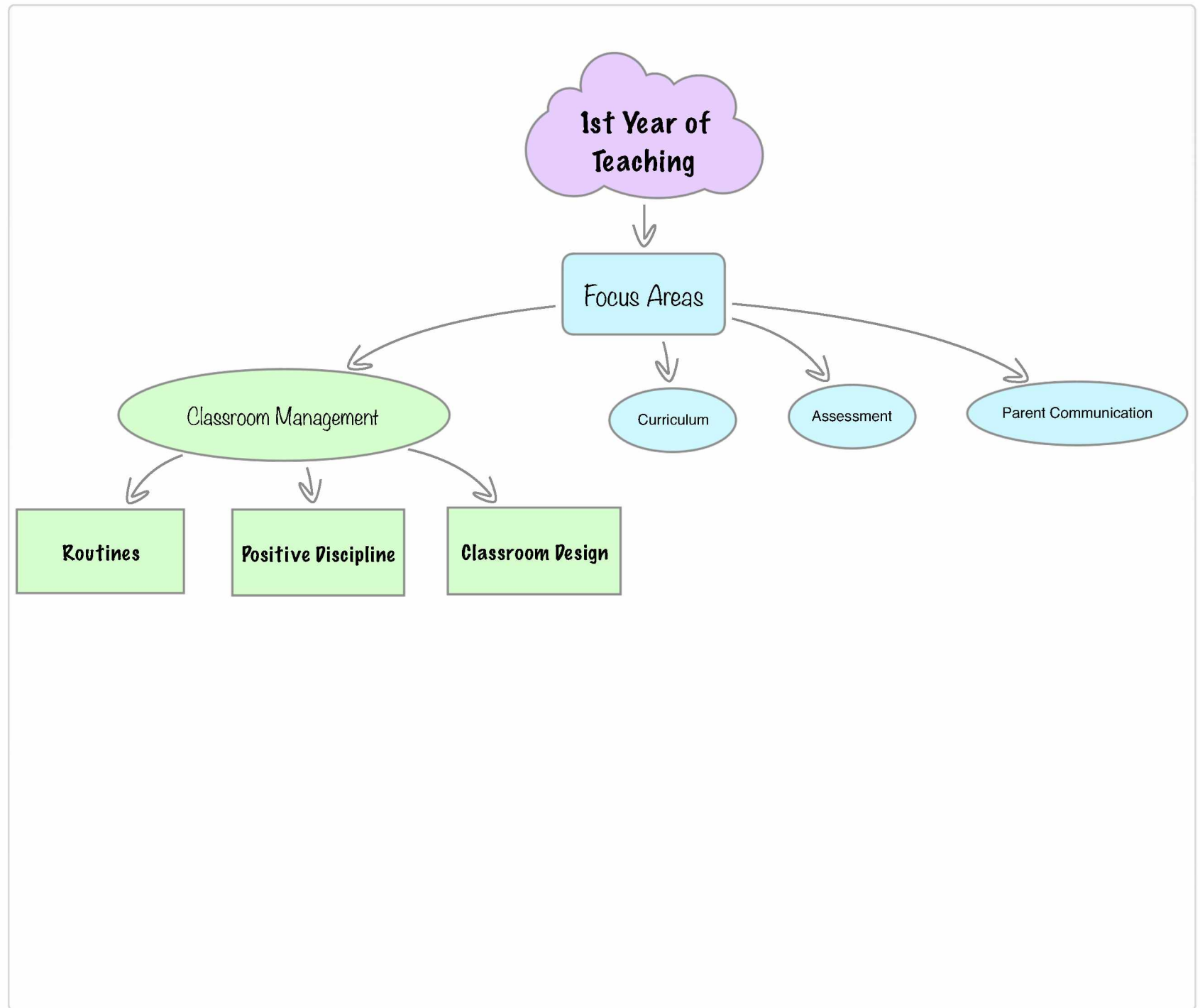


Classroom Management

Classroom management can cover a lot of ground. Here are three topics under classroom management to consider as a new teacher,

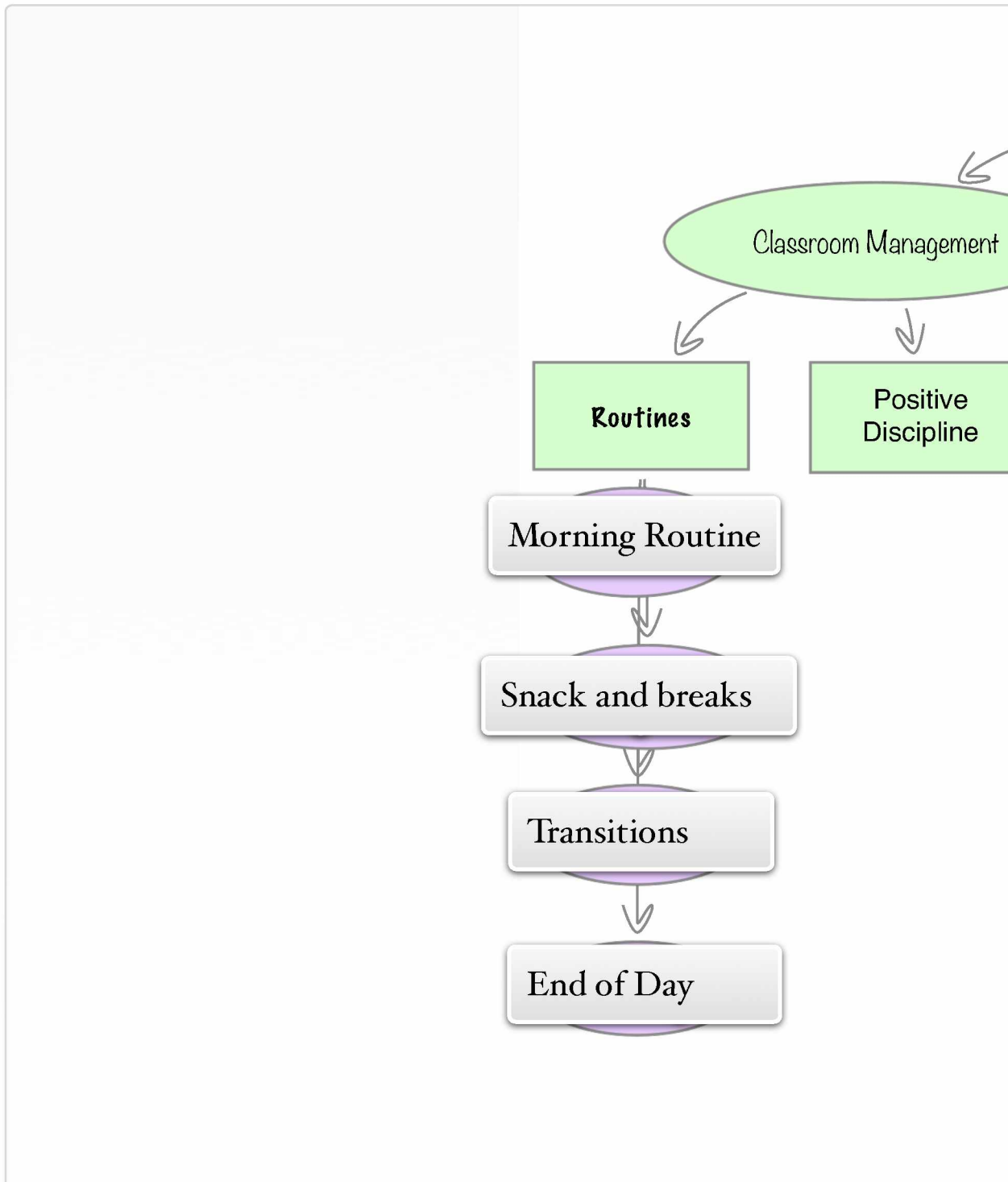
- Classroom routines
- Positive Discipline
- Classroom Design

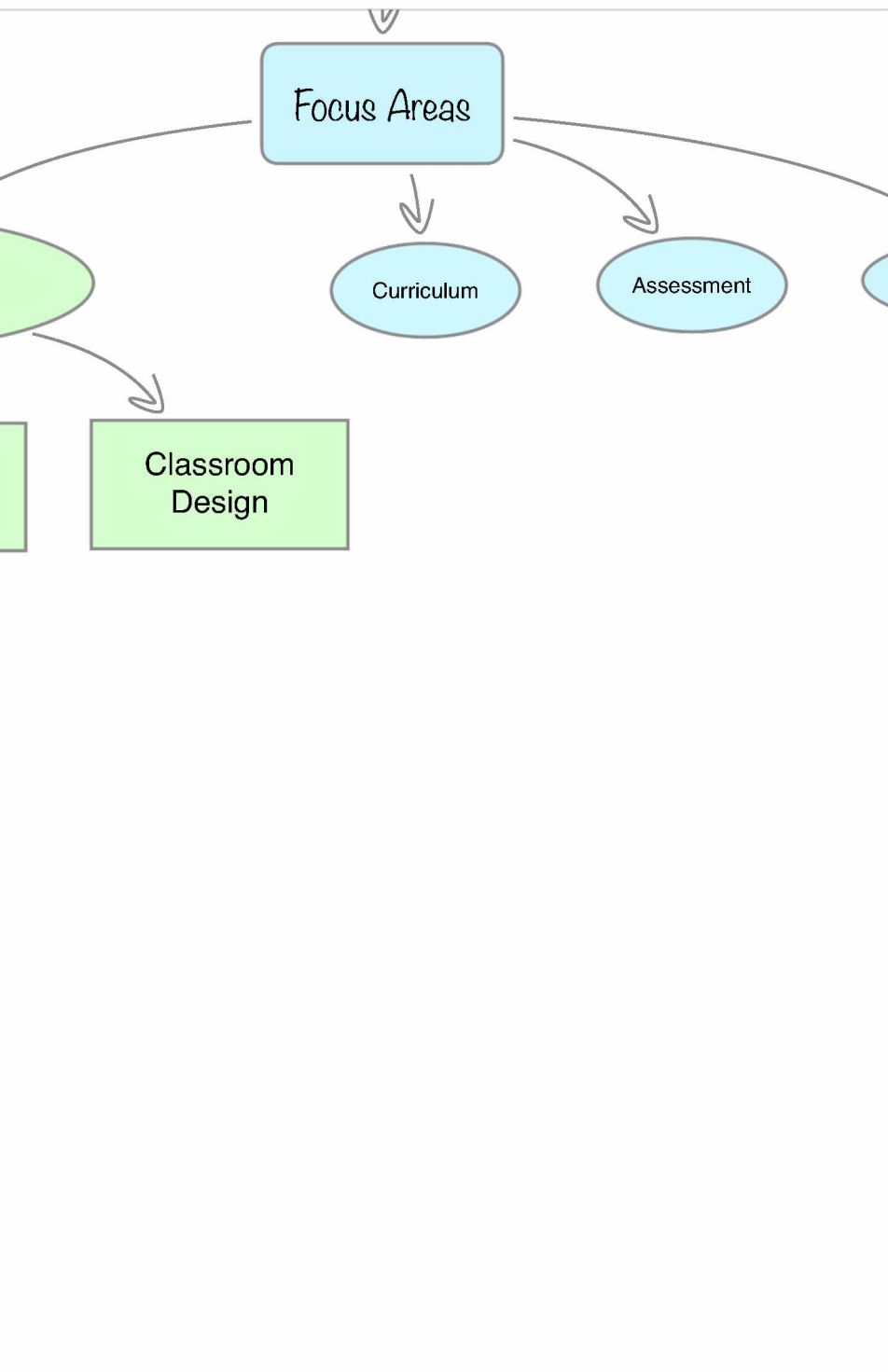
Decision Making Map



Classroom Routines

Click on a topic to get started!





Discussion

Pick up any professional literature for teachers regarding classroom management and you are bound to find a section on routines. Advice about routines spans the spectrum from strict to free flowing routines that change with the day. While there is no right or wrong answer there are some things to keep in mind when pondering your routine. Be sure to consider your school environment as a whole. When your class goes to specials (e.g. music, library, physical education) does the other teacher expect you to be on time or consistently a few minutes ahead or behind?

Likely the most important part of establishing routine is to think about your group of students. It is okay to test out a few different routines at the beginning of the year. Try setting a strict routine to start and see if that motivates your group to get work done. Sometimes our best work does not happen in the designated time allotted and your group of students may wither under a strict schedule and blossom when given more freedom in the classroom routine. Test it out and find what feels right to you and for your students.

A short word of caution though, be sure to pick some form of routine fairly early in the school year. Too much testing of routines can leave you and your students feeling dazed and lost.

Pearl

“Routines can change from year to year. Find what is right for your group of students.”

Resources

The First Six Weeks of School by Paula Denton

The First Days of School by Harry Wong

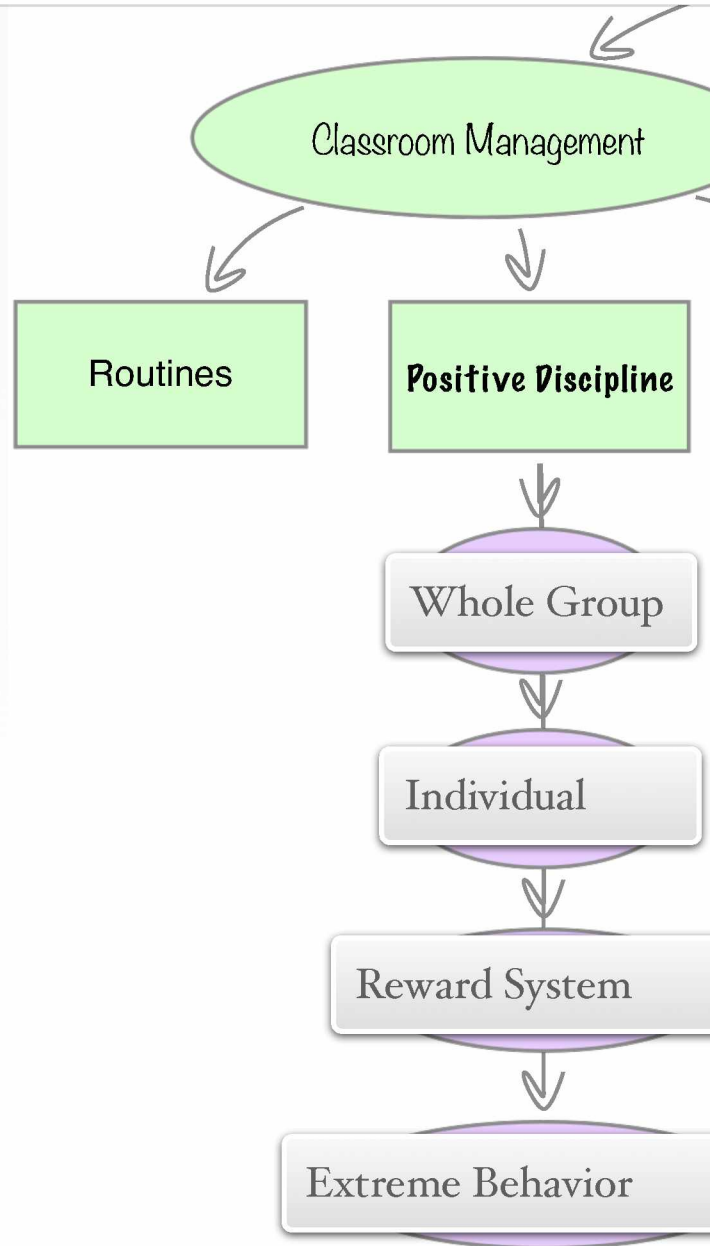
The Morning Meeting Book by Roxanne Kriete

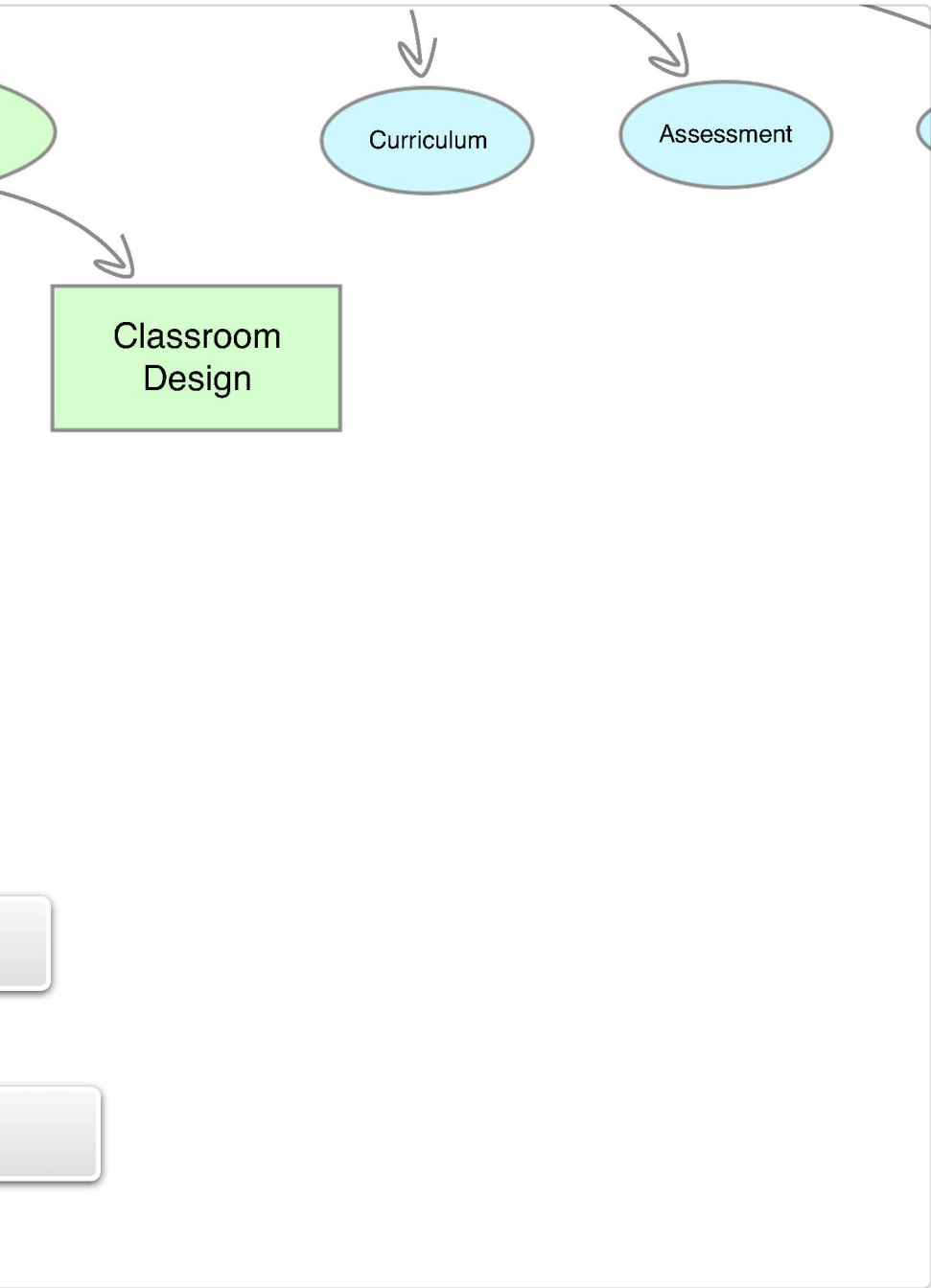
The Skillful Teacher by Jon Saphier

Chapter 3

Positive Discipline

Click on a topic to get started!





Discussion

Talk to almost any teacher about discipline and most will state that they want to create a positive classroom environment where students feel safe to explore new ideas. But how do they (and now you!) create that positive environment? Honestly, it is a conglomeration of things coming together, but one of the big pieces is your classroom discipline.



Pearl

“You will get further with honey
than you will with lemons!”

It’s hard to think about discipline because as teachers we want to spend our days joyously exploring new concepts and ideas with students, not doling out punishment for poor behavior, and that is why it’s important to have a plan.

Three ingredients (which are by no means all of the ingredients in this discipline cake) that help create a positive classroom include, being clear with your expectations, keeping it positive, and holding to your word. If students know the rules they will follow them, especially if they help to create them! My grandmother used to admonish me when I was being particularly obnoxious, stating that “I would get a lot further in life with an ounce of honey rather than

an ounce of lemon.” This maxim, not surprisingly holds true in the classroom. Students thrive on positive reinforcement; test it out and I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised. Finally, hold to your word. It seems easy enough, but you will be tested. My advice before you issue an ultimatum (and try not to, offer choices instead) is to think about the follow through required if a student makes that choice because they will if for no other reason than to test you. You won’t get it right 100% of the time but that is how we learn!

A final word on extreme behaviors. It is very likely that you will encounter students with extreme behaviors at some point in your career, and thinking about ways to handle those situations beforehand will help you greatly when you’re in the moment. What will you say when a student throws a chair, runs from the classroom, screams at you, climbs under a desk and refuses to come out? All of these things have happened to new teachers. A few pieces of advice when dealing with extreme behaviors, remember that the class as a whole comes first; be self assured with regards to what is right and wrong in a school setting; and know who to call when the situation is too much for you to handle.

Resources

Positive Discipline in the Classroom by Jane Nelsen

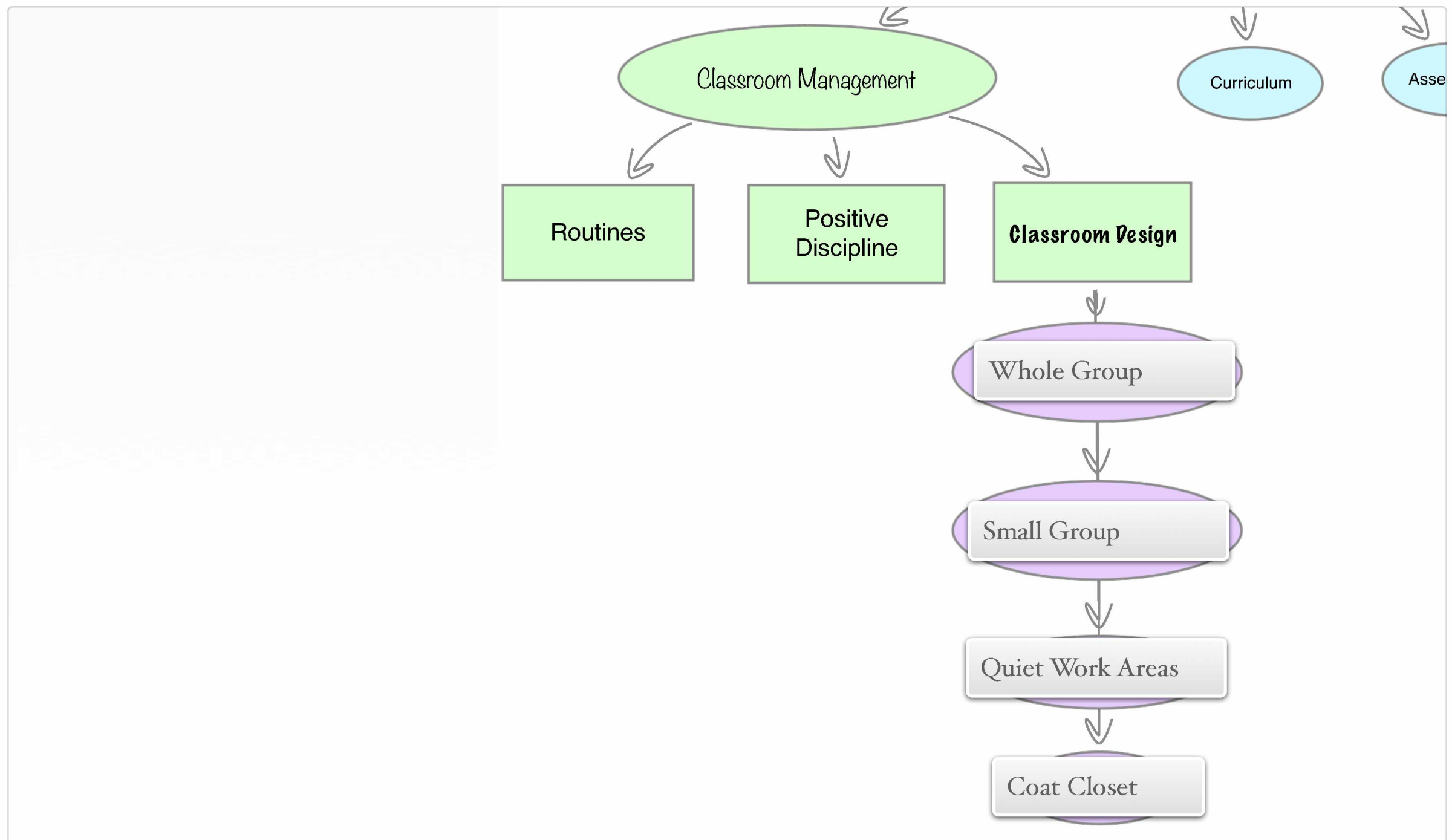
How to Talk so Kids Can Learn by Adele Faber

Rules in School by Mary Forton

Please Don’t Sit on the Kids by Clare Cherry

Classroom Design

Click on a topic to get started!



Discussion

There is nothing like the feeling of seeing your classroom for the very first time. In my case I gulped and thought “holy cow there is a lot to do in here!” Teachers are notoriously packrats and save anything that might be useful in the future, so be prepared to wade through a great deal of stuff before you start to see *your* classroom.

Thinking about classroom design can actually take a great deal of your time. Test out a few different designs and enlist the help of the custodians who will assuredly know where to find the table that is the perfect height or a bookcase or whatever you might need. Don’t be afraid to think outside of the box when it comes to designing the perfect space to meet your needs (it is not unheard of to take the legs of tables!).

An area of the classroom that hopefully will not plague your life, but might without careful consideration, is the coat closet. I know it sounds obscure, controlling, anal-retentive, however it is important to have a place for everything and require everything be in its place! It will take some practice for students to get the hang of the system but if you have a logical reason and layout, and hold students accountable your life will be much easier when you’re not tripping over 25 pairs of snow boots!

Resources

The Daily 5 by Gail Boushey

Classroom Spaces That Work by Marlynn Clayton


Spaces and Places by Debbie Diller

Pearl

“Your classroom should feel like home, after all you do spend 8+ hours a day there!”

Chapter 4

Curriculum



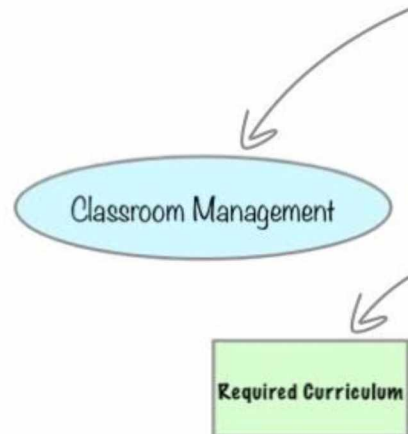
“It is by that which cannot be taken away that we can measure ourselves.”

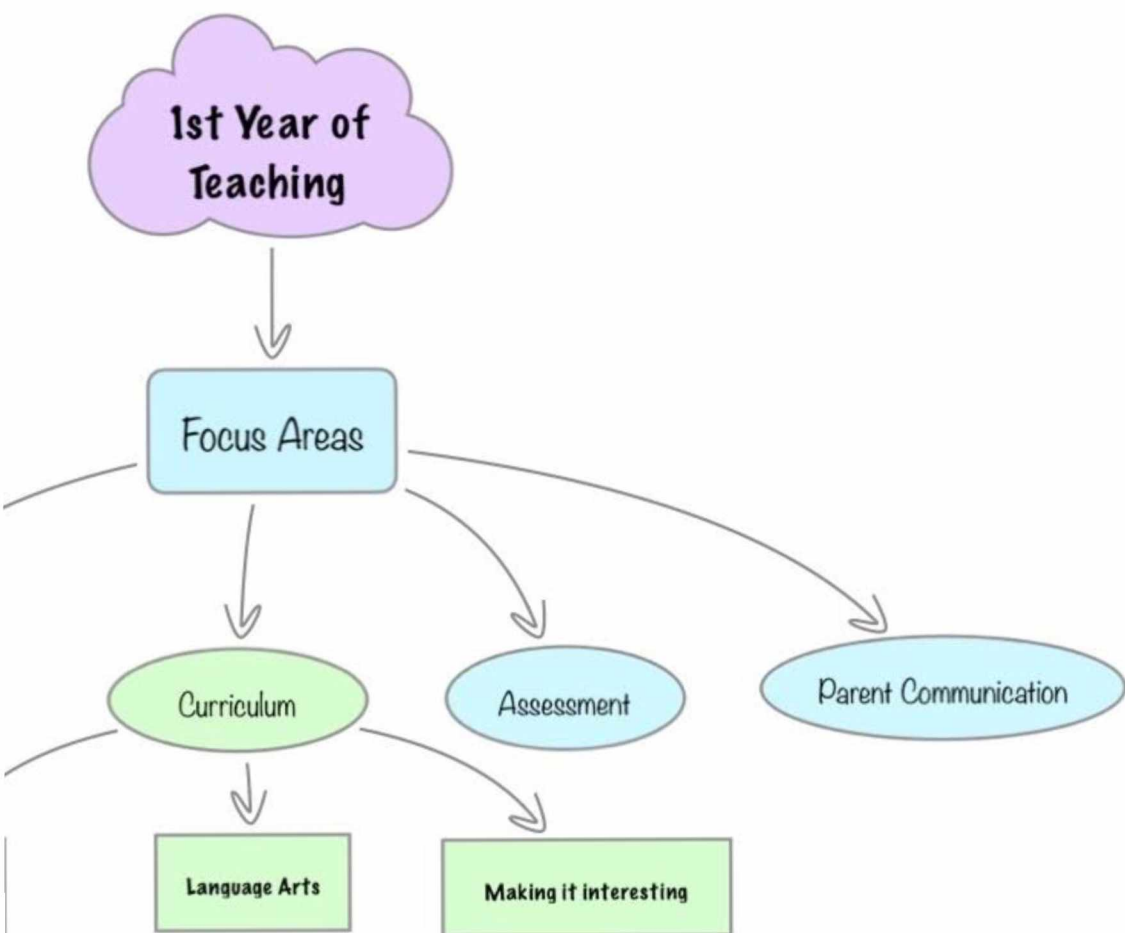
- Mia Farrow

Curriculum

Curriculum is the one area that may or may not be in your control. There are many things to consider when thinking about curriculum, but above all remember that it is ultimately about doing the best for your students.

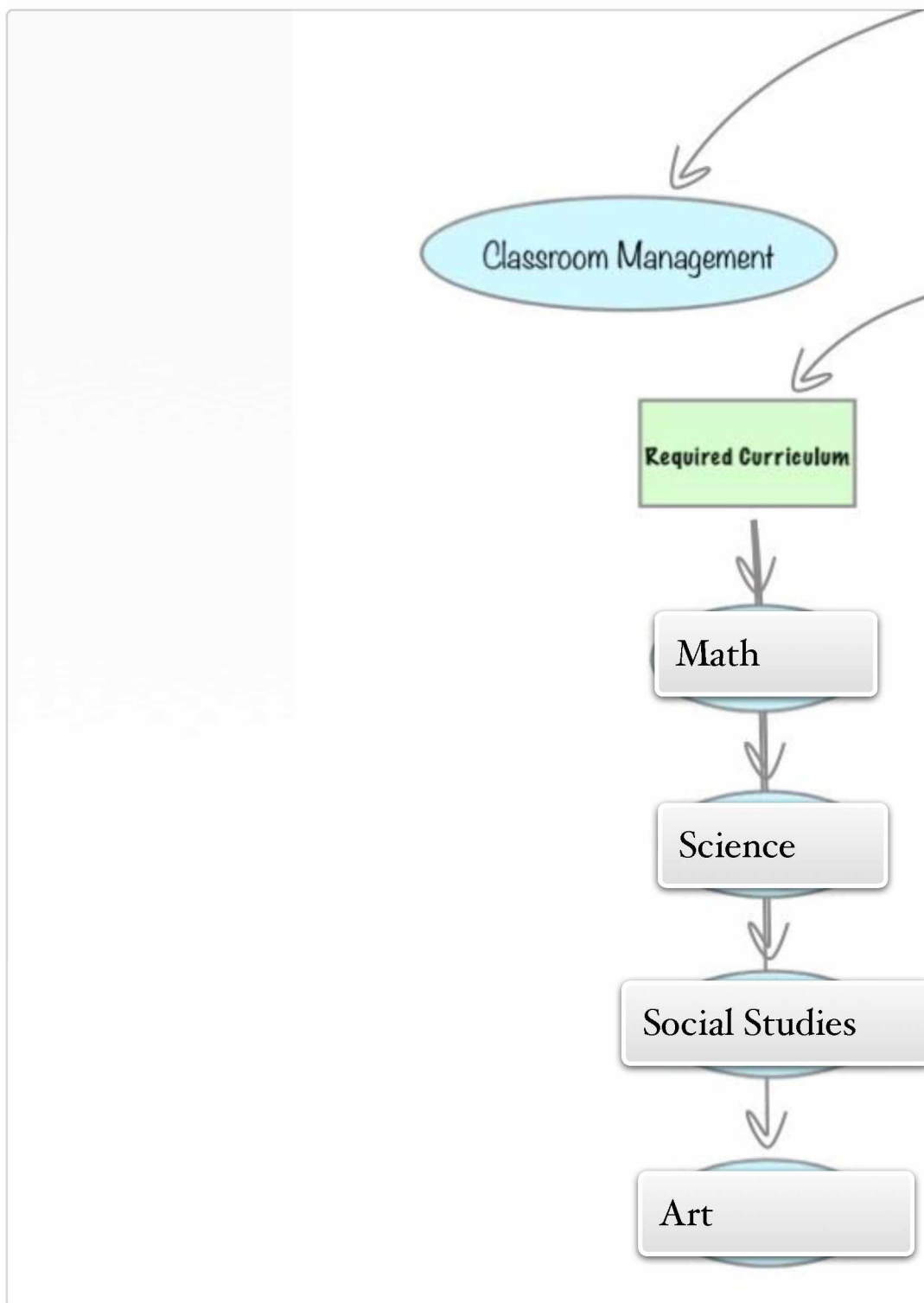
- Required Curriculum
- Language Arts
- Making it Interesting

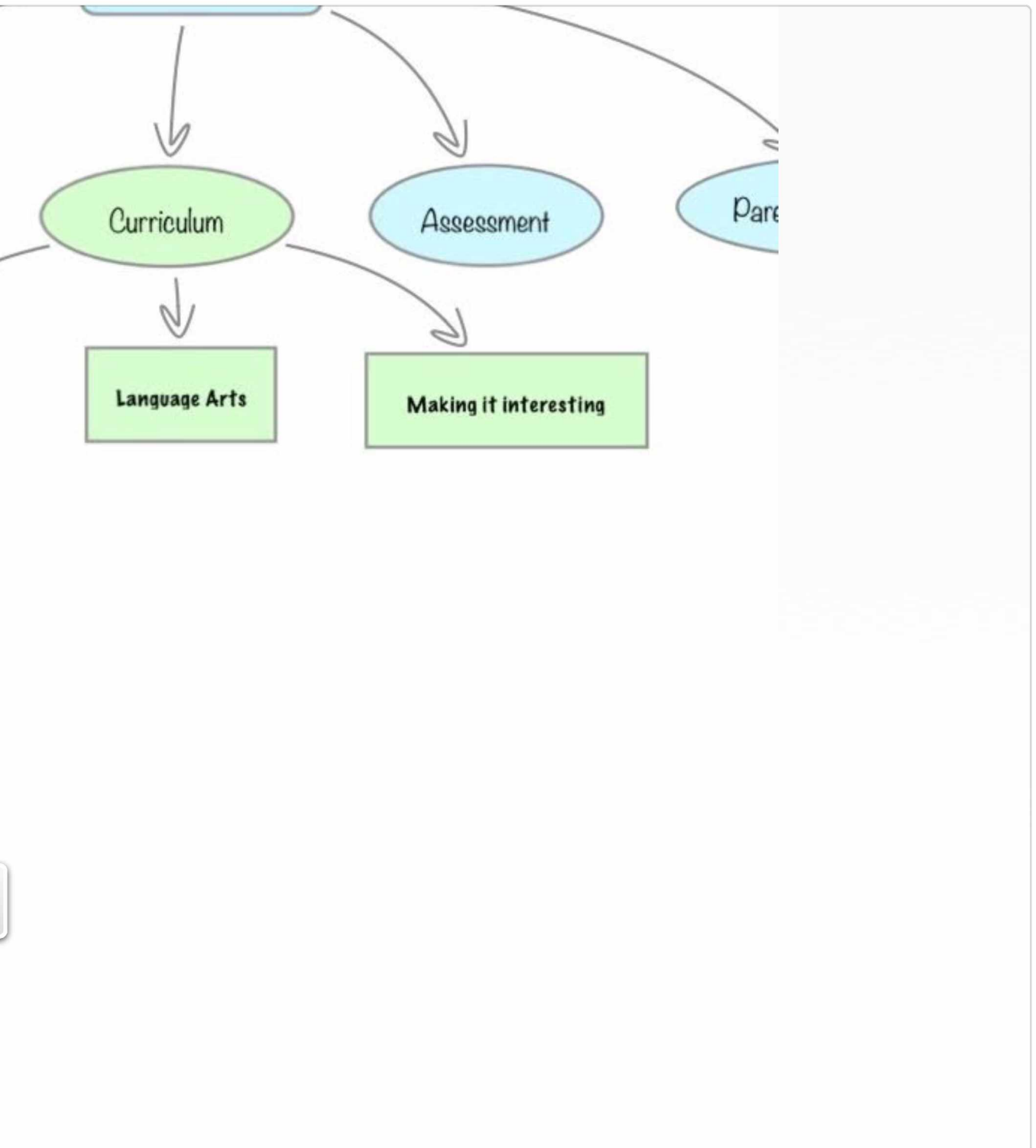




Required Curriculum

click on a topic to get started!





Discussion

You have your classroom set up, a classroom management plan in place now what the heck are you supposed to teach?! More than likely the school district has provided you a set of materials for a subject area, which you may or may not be required to use.

However, regardless of whether or not you have to use the materials provided, it is important to note that these materials are not the same as the curriculum. Districts will write/adopt a curriculum for a given grade level and subject area (e.g. Common Core) and then look for materials that most closely align with the curriculum. This is an important distinction to make for new teachers because you may feel that you have your reading materials and if you follow the teachers guide you will have done your job, that is not always the case. Be sure to find a copy of the school districts curriculum for your grade level and compare the curriculum to the materials provided.

Another important factor to consider when examining curriculum is the required number of minutes per day/week for each subject area. Sometimes you will find that when you add up the required number of minutes for each subject the total exceeds the number of hours in a day/week that you have with the students. One simple way around this time crunch is to have projects/activities that double up on subject areas. This is easier at the intermediate level, but not impossible at the primary level it just takes a bit of creativity.

Lastly, with all the required curriculum and pressure to cover a certain amount of material in a given time period, don't neglect the arts! Art can be a fantastically fun and engaging way to present

material to students. The projects and activities done during art can have a more lasting and meaningful effect on students than more traditional methods of instruction.

Pearl

“Make sure you know what you’re supposed to teach! Sketching out a timeline for the year can greatly help your week-to-week planning.”

Resources

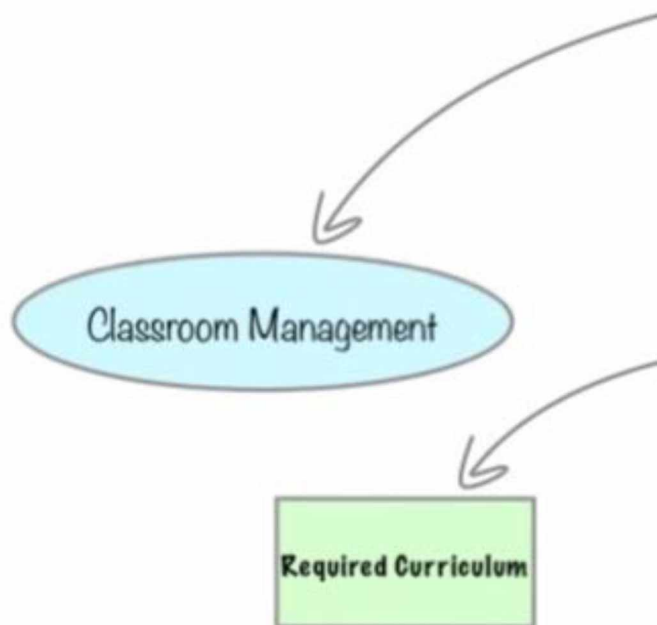
Fairbanks North Star Borough School District- **Curriculum**

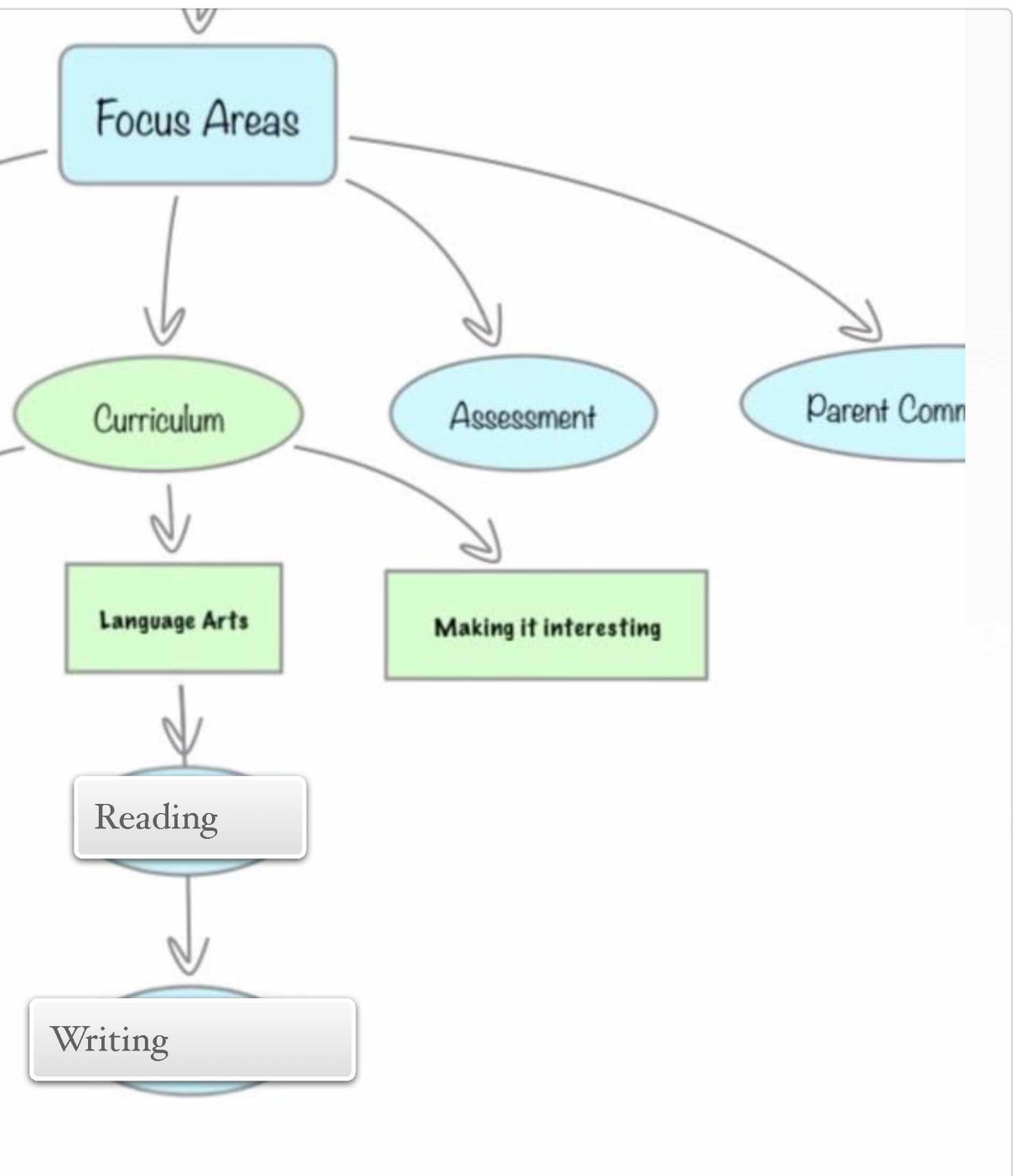
School Arts by Davis Publications

Chapter 4

Language Arts

click on a topic to get started!





Discussion

How do you teach someone to read and write, or improve their reading and writing skills? As a new teacher this is one of the most important questions you will have to sort out throughout the school year. Having a solid foundation in language arts is essential for students to have a successful school career. There are many different resources available to teachers pertaining to language arts, check out a few based on what you think you might need help with and see which one fits your style. You can also adopt aspects of different methods to form something that is uniquely yours. Often it is about trial and error and finding what works. However, be sure to do quick checks with your students frequently to gauge the effectiveness of a given method.

Pearl

“You read what you like to read, so let your students read what they like to read, it will make life more interesting and you would be amazed at the lessons you can pull from almost any book.”

Resources

On Solid Ground by Sharon Taberski

The Daily 5 by Gail Boushey

Invitations by Regie Routman

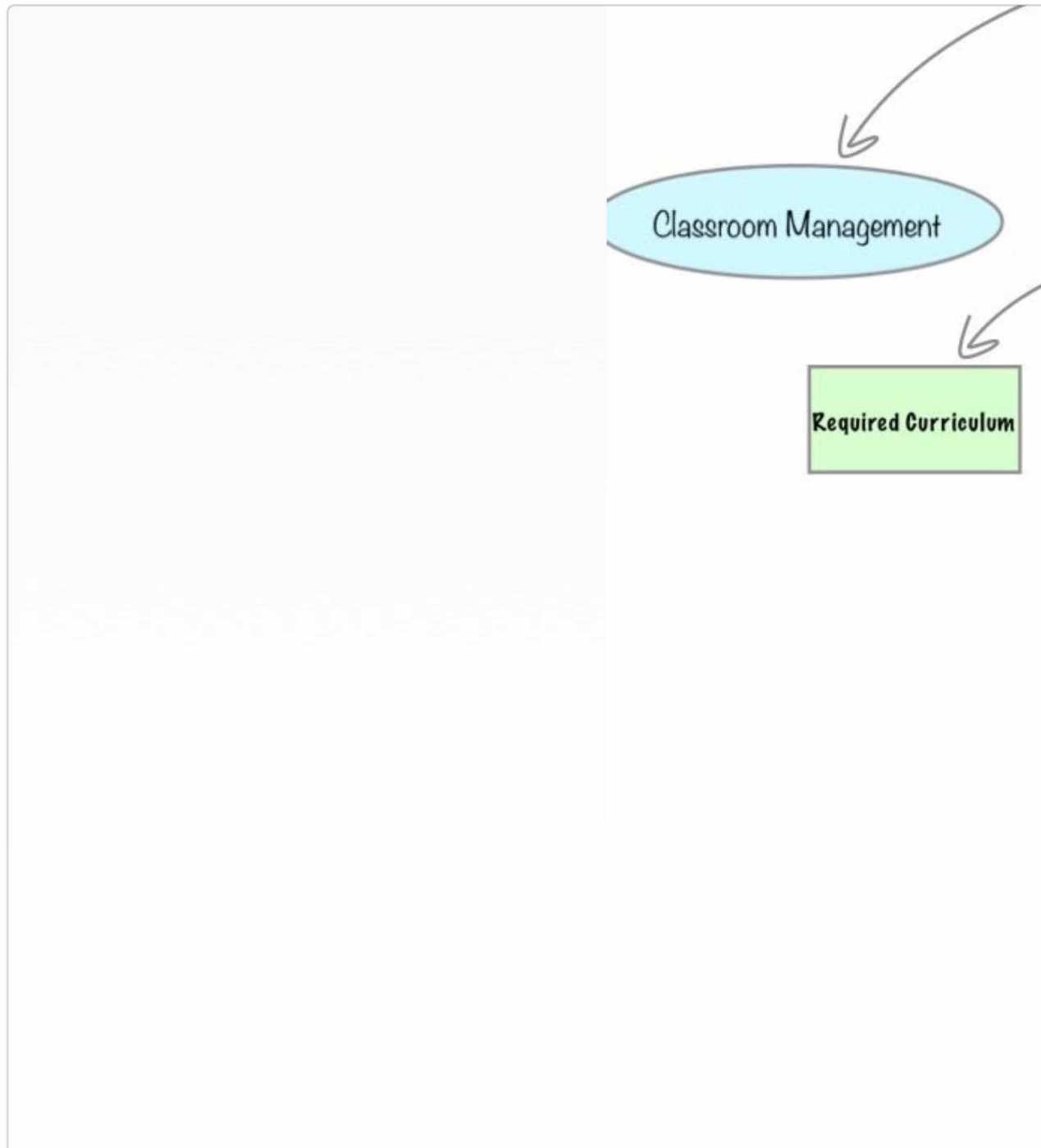
Snapshots by Linda Hoyt

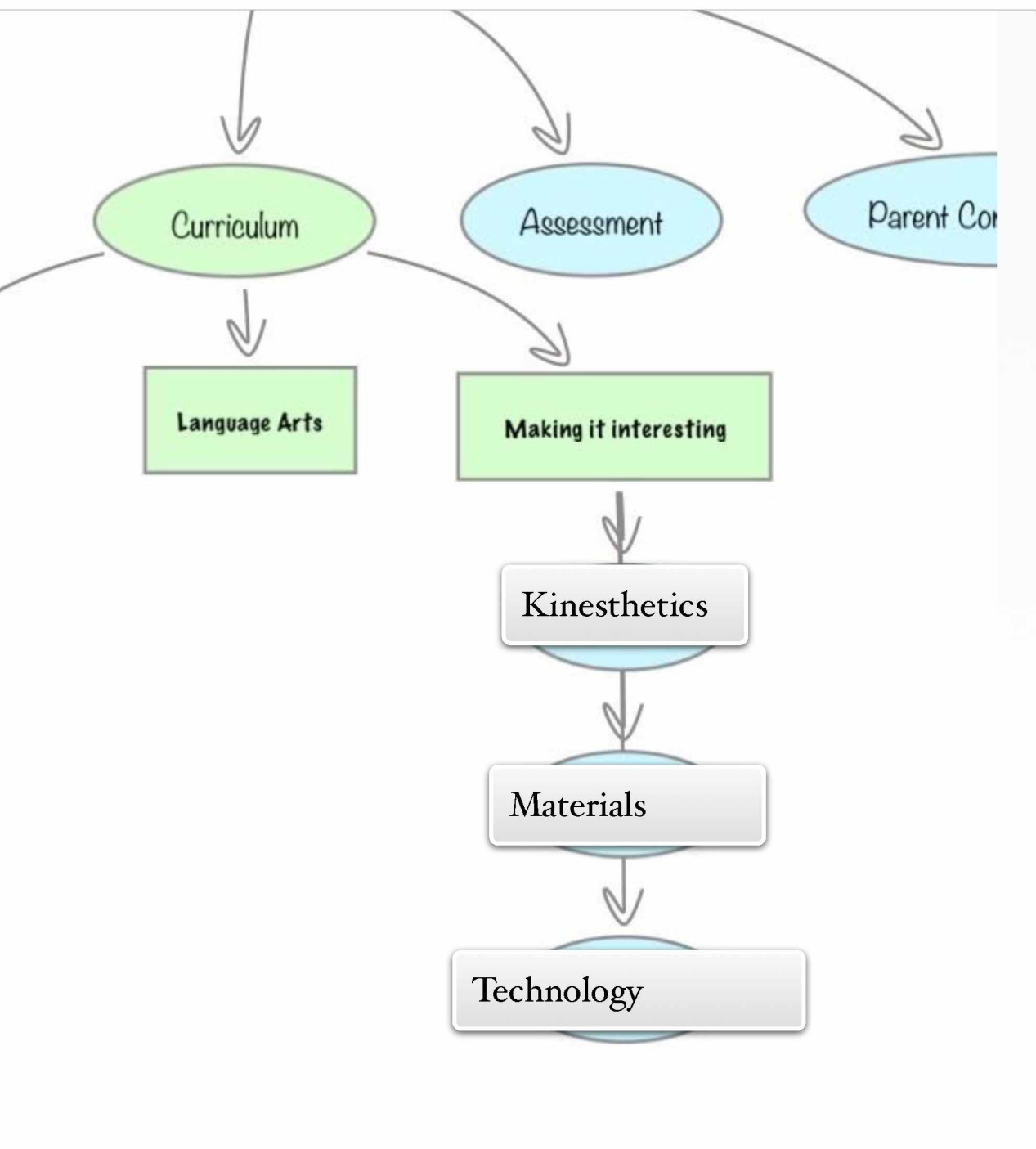
Education Northwest

Chapter 4

Making it Interesting!

Click on a topic to get started!





Discussion

This is the creative and fun side of teaching that we all love. It's what gives our classrooms our very own feel that can't be duplicated anywhere else.

Pearl

"Standing in front of your class is like being on stage and you're the principal actress!"

One of the easiest ways to make learning fun is to incorporate kinesthetics. I don't know any adult who likes to sit for hours on end, so expecting that from our students is preposterous. As with any activity be sure to model and discuss your expectations of students before embarking.

As teachers we are always tempted to create exactly what we need because the resource we have isn't just right. This compulsive need to create new materials is likely a personality trait required to become a teacher, and as such has led to an amazing array of materials and innovative ideas. Be sure to check online or with other grade level teachers before heading down the development path because it is likely you can find what you're looking for. Teachers

love to share and seasoned teachers have whole cabinets devoted to materials just waiting to be explored!

Technology is an interesting component to the classroom. When used in a meaningful manner it can enhance the learning experience, however it takes a great deal of time and energy to integrate technology in a purposeful manner.

Resources

[Learning Through Academic Choice](#) by Paula Denton

[Everybody Wins: 393 Non-Competitive Games for Young Children](#)
by Jeffrey Sobel

[Activity Promotion Laboratory](#)- East Carolina University

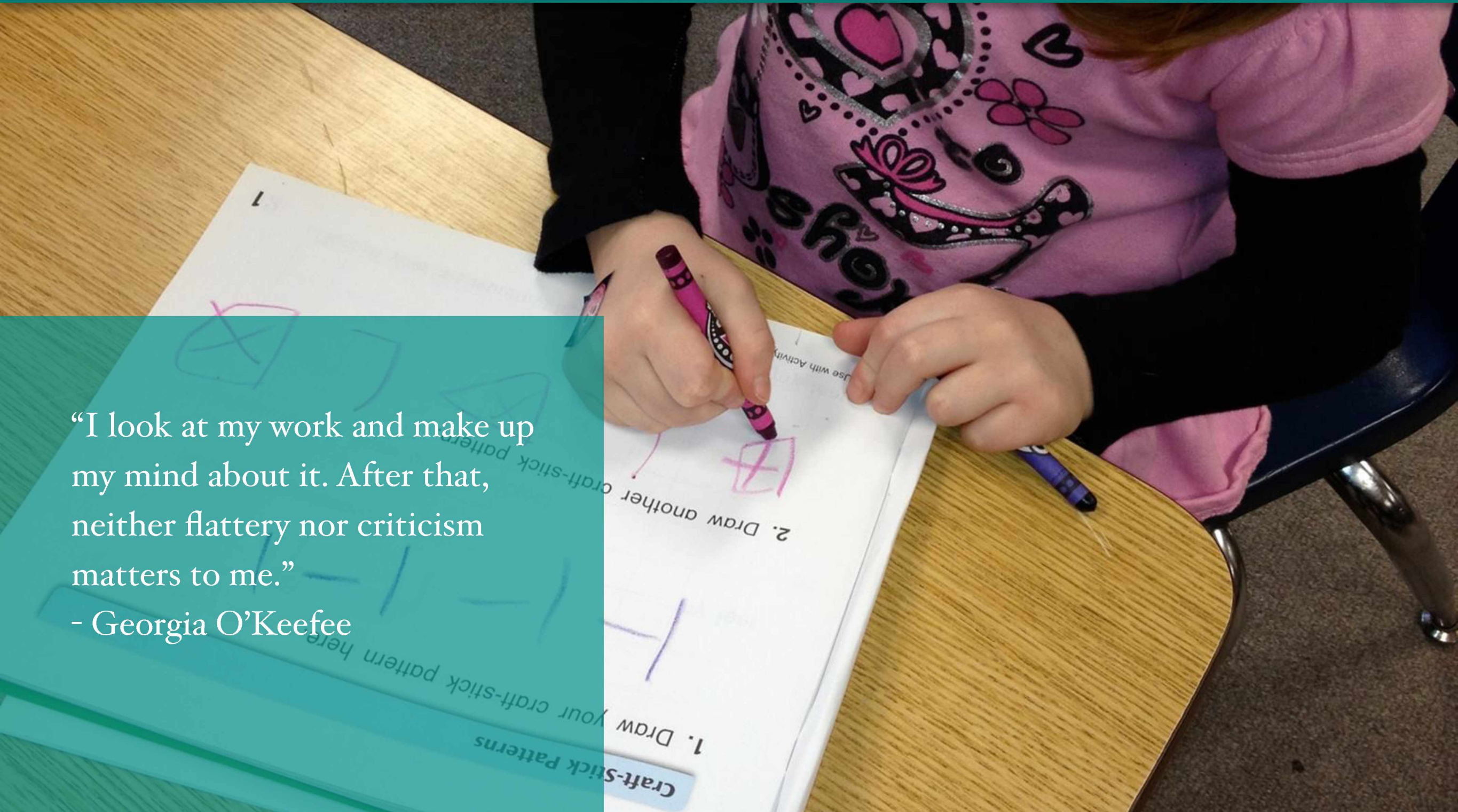
[Brain POP](#)

[Pinterest](#)

Assessment

“I look at my work and make up
my mind about it. After that,
neither flattery nor criticism
matters to me.”

- Georgia O'Keefe



Assessment

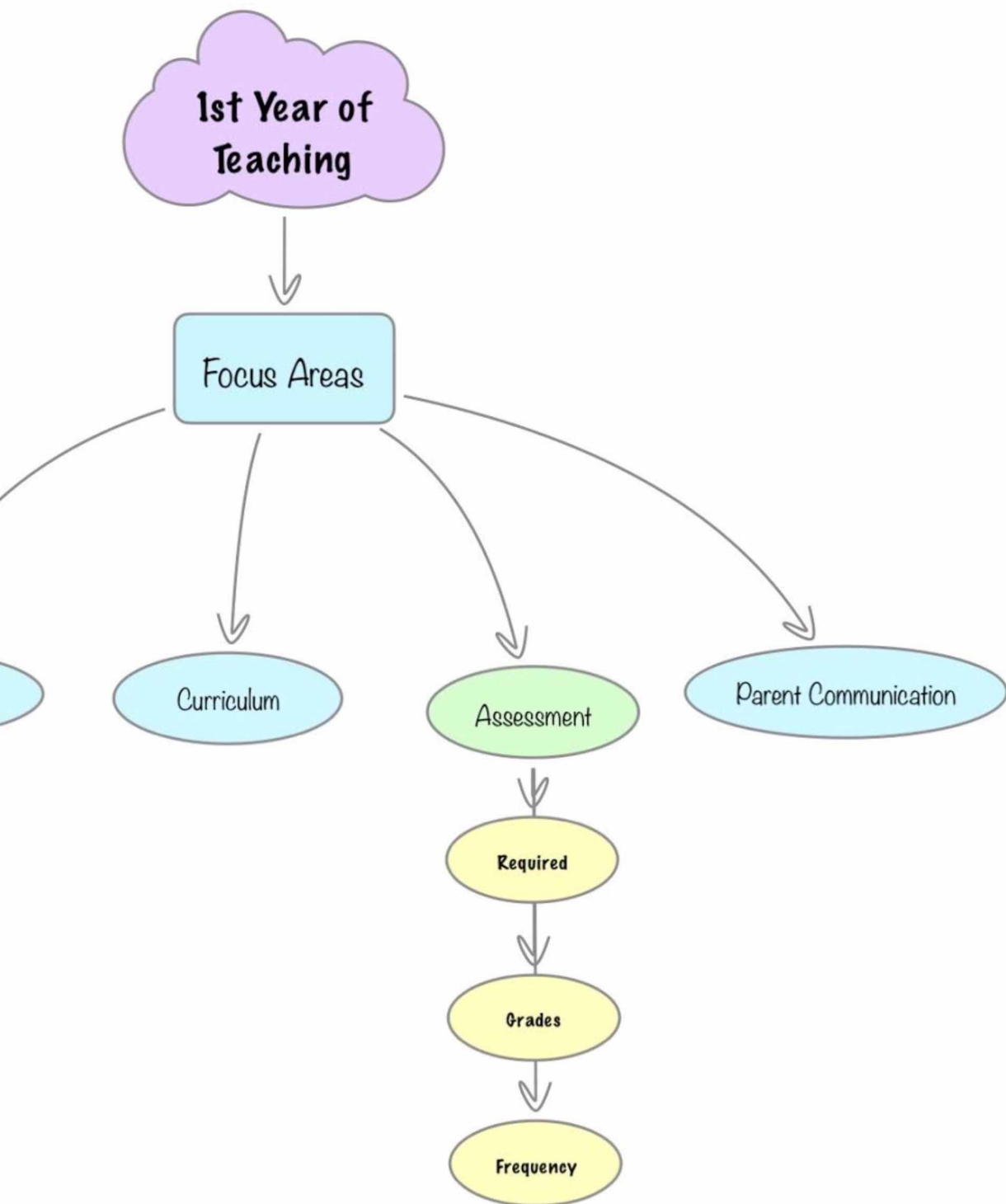
Assessment can be one of the most challenging aspects of teaching. With everything else going on in the classroom assessment can sometimes be an afterthought. However, finding out what your students know should be at the center of all teaching, and teaching strategies should be modified based on what your students can and can't do.

When thinking about assessment consider the following:

- What's required
- Frequency
- Grades

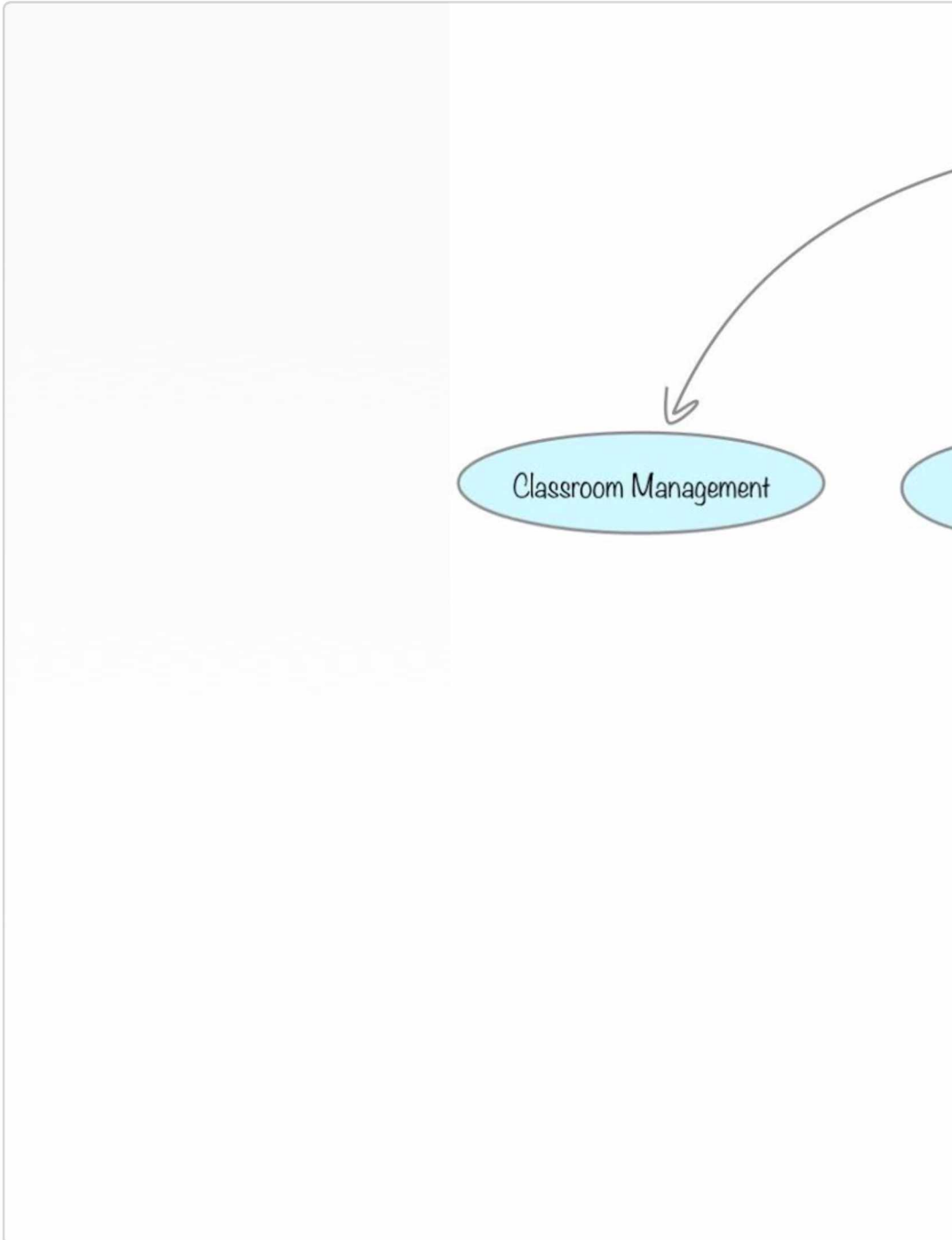


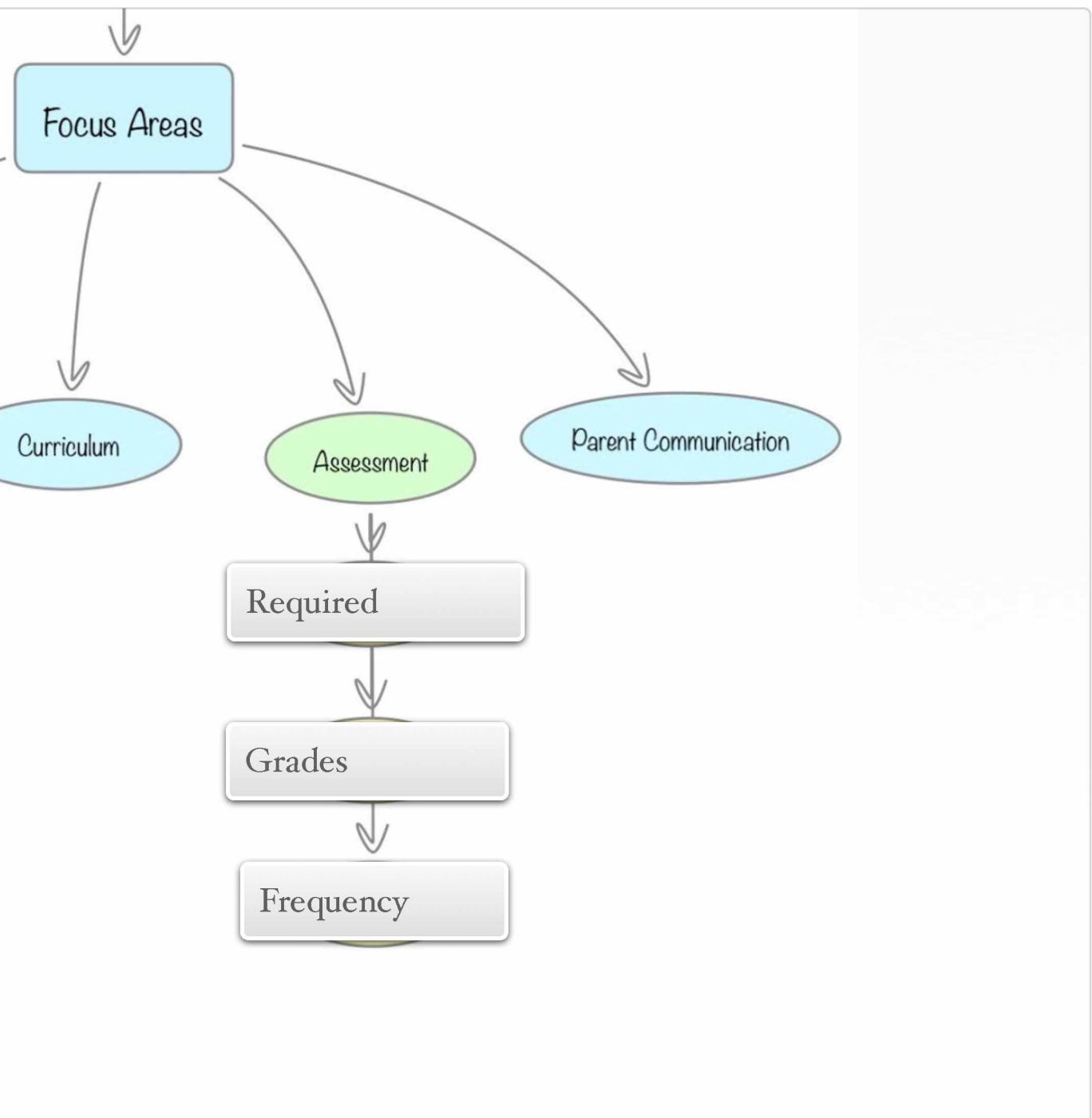
Classroom Management



Assessment

click on a topic to get started!





Discussion

Unfortunately, assessment comes as an afterthought for some of us new teachers. We are so focused on other aspects of the classroom and our teaching practices that we forget to capture assessment data. The best solution to this problem is to incorporate assessment into whatever you're doing in the classroom, that way the data is there when you sit down to enter grades. This form of assessment, known as “natural assessment”, is also more meaningful measure of student growth because you are assessing students on their actual abilities.



Pearl

“Let assessment develop from instruction (not the other way around)”

When it comes to keeping your grade book find someone who is well versed and willing to answer questions. There are so many different ways to enter grades and display progress reports that it can be overwhelming. Also, make sure you know what parents can see in real time. With web based grade books parents and students can often see grades as soon as you enter them. This can lead to issues if you are entering raw grades that still need to be modified.

One last thing that can catch a new teacher off guard when it comes to grades are dates and deadlines. Most school districts have specific deadlines for teachers to enter and finalize grades, including mid-quarter grades. Make sure you know the dates that you have to have grades in by so you can plan your time accordingly. The administrative secretary will likely know what dates things are due.

Resources

Natural Classroom Assessment by Jeffery K. Smith

Parent Communication



“Man did not weave the web of life;
he is merely a strand in it.”

-Chief Seattle

Parent Communication

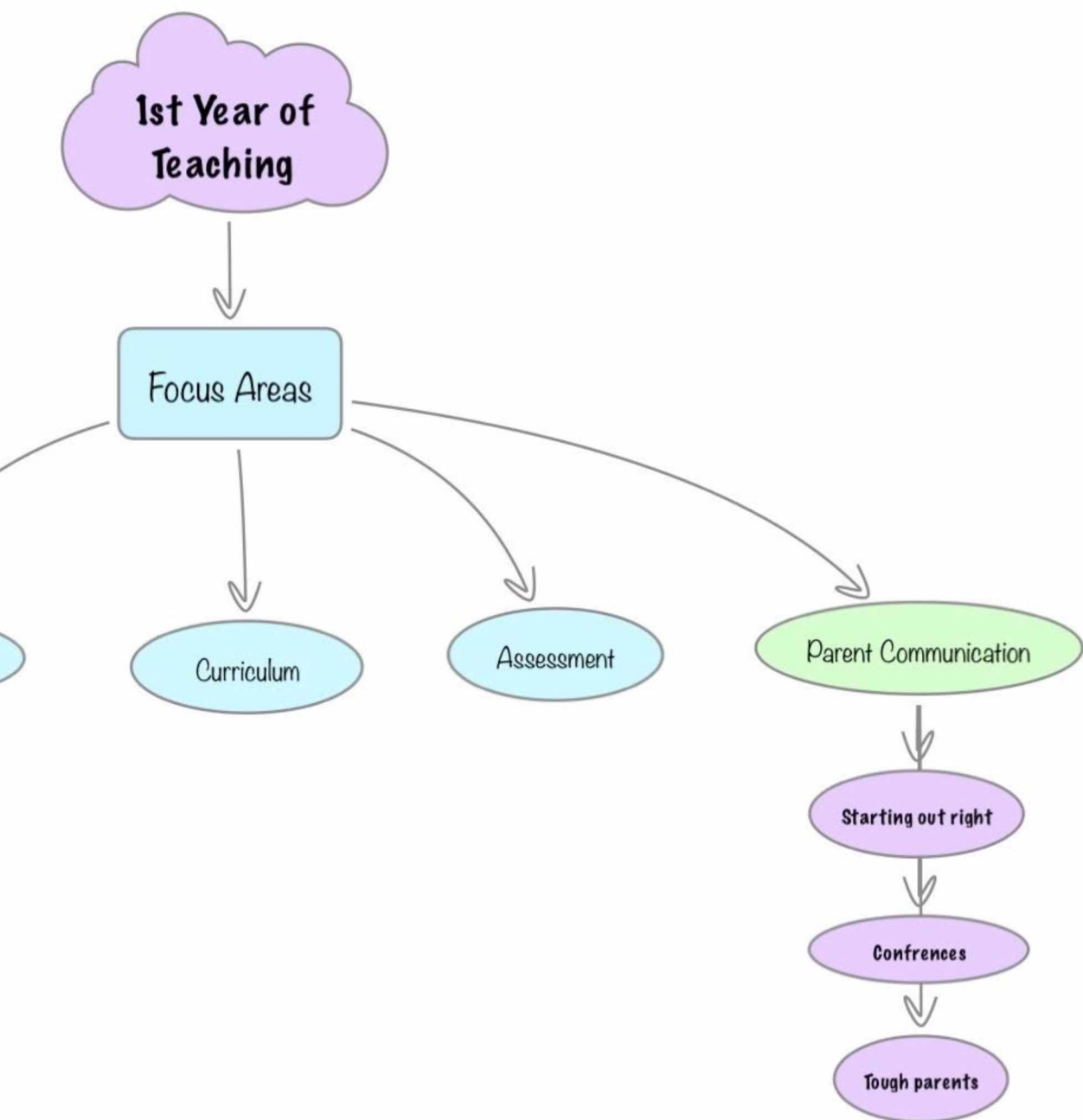
Establishing an open line of communication with parents can make or break your school year.

Consider the following when thinking about parent communication:

- Starting out Right
- Conferences
- Tough Parents



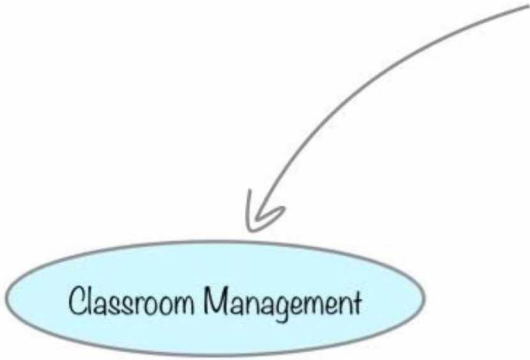
Classroom Management

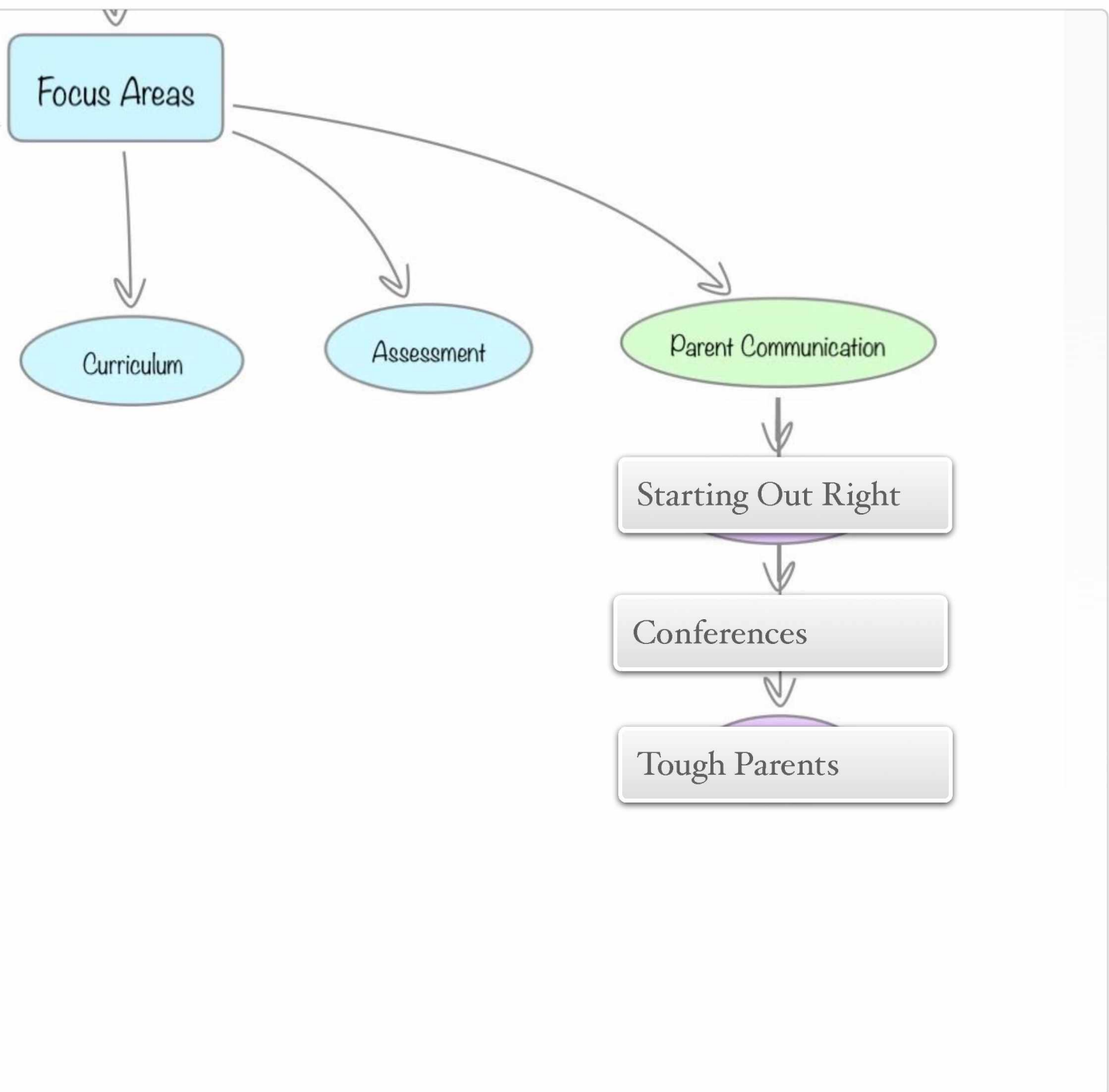


Chapter 6

Parent Communication

Click on a topic to get started!





Discussion

Communication with parents is an important aspect of teaching and having good communication with parents can make your life easier as the school year progresses. A great way to open positive communication with parents is to explain the ins-and-outs of your classroom. Whether you send home a welcome packet to parents discussing how your classroom works, or you give a short talk at the back-to-school night, explaining how things work in your classroom will help foster communication. Another way to establish communication is to call each parent during the first few weeks of school and share positive accolade about their student. You would be surprised how far this simple gesture will take you in having good communication with parents.

As a first year teacher parent/teacher conferences are likely the furthest thing from your mind during the first quarter, but rest assured they will sneak up on you. While you are designing your brilliant curriculum and thinking about assessment take a few seconds and think about how you see conferences playing out. Student led portfolios are a great way to showcase what's been happening in the classroom and students take pride in telling/showing their parents about their work. As conferences approach it might be a good idea to find out what types of norms your school has in place and how conferences are scheduled.

No one wants to deal with unhappy parents, but as a teacher you are bound to face a few in your career. The best thing you can do is to be sure of yourself and ask for help when you feel uncomfortable. Brining in a third party can help clarify communication and

hopefully aid in finding a resolution to the problem. When parents are upset it often can be attributed to not knowing the whole story or seeing the entire picture. As frustrating and trying as it might be to communicate with a difficult parent, keep in mind that your main concern is the student.

Pearl

“A problem is an opportunity in disguise.”

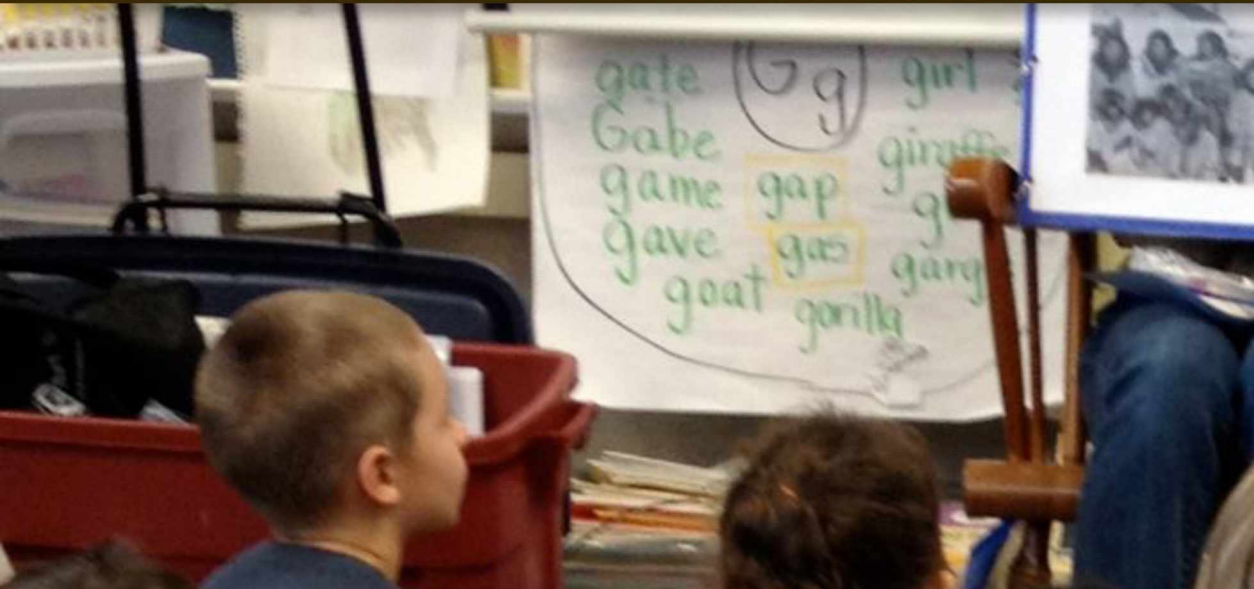
Resources

Parents and Teachers Working Together by Carol Davis

More Than Bake Sales by James Vopat

Chapter 7

Closing



“Tell me and I forget. Teach me
and I remember. Involve me and I
learn.”

-Benjamin Franklin



when I was
six. These are
my friends and
we are
wearing our
parkas with
warm hoods.

Kk

Koola and Kirren
Are in the kitchen
Hiding from Kangaroo.
When she turns on a light
To find her kite,
Koola and Kirren say "BOOP"



Closing

I hope this has sparked some ideas and helped you to think about some of the decisions that will have to be made during your first year of teaching. Remember to pace yourself . . . it is a marathon not a sprint! Take good care of yourself. Your students deserve to have you at your very best, not bleary eyed and fuzzy brained from an all night planning session. Keep your sense of humor, get good rest, have a social life outside of work and you will have a great year!

Cheers!



A Final Pearl

“No matter how hard you work, no matter how much you plan, there are always going to be things that don't go the way you want or expect them to go. Instead of being upset by this, look at all the possibilities that lay ahead. I think that the word "problem" is negatively charged and can make you feel down or frustrated. The word "opportunity" is much more hopeful and keeps you moving along the process of decision making.”

- Kathie Cook

Retired Teacher & Principal

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Appendix: Master Guide for Questions

A: Focus Area- Classroom Management

1. Routines

a. Morning

What will the students be doing when they first come in? Will they be working independently or in small groups? Will students follow the same routine every morning or will it vary?

b. Snack/breaks

How often are students going to take breaks? How will bathroom breaks be handled? Will students have a snack break?

c. Transitions

How will students transition from one activity to the next? Will you have a routine transition for activities that happen daily (e.g. lunch, recess)? Will you have a universal signal to get everyone's attention?

d. End of day

How will students get ready for the end of the day? Are papers/ homework passed out at the end of the day? Will you dismiss students or will the bell? Will you differentiate between students who ride the bus and those being picked up?

Notes on Routines

2. Positive Discipline

a. Whole group

What will be your method for positive reinforcement for the whole class? Will there be specific times that the class can earn a reward (e.g. transition times) or can they earn them anytime?

b. Individual

What will your method for individual positive reinforcement be? How will students earn rewards? Will everyone be recognized daily, weekly, monthly?

c. Reward system

Will students individually or as a class be recognized for their efforts daily, weekly, monthly, or quarterly? What types of rewards can students earn?

d. Extreme behavior

Have you thought about what to do with a student who displays extreme behavior (e.g. non compliant, throwing chairs, running from classroom)? What is your schools policy? What other adult can assist when needed and how do you contact them? What are your boundaries for working with a student displaying extreme behavior?

Notes on Positive Discipline

3. Classroom Design

a. Whole group instruction

Where will you deliver whole group instruction? Is there more than one location for large group instruction? What resources will you need (e.g. whiteboard, document camera)?

b. Small group instruction

Where will small group instruction take place? What resources will you need close at hand?

c. Quiet work areas

Will you have designated "quite zones" or areas for working? Are quite areas for independent work or partners too? Will a quite work area also double as a "chill out zone" where students can take a break before coming back to the group?

d. Coat closet

How are you going to deal with outdoor gear? Will students need to hang their items in a specific order? Where will hats, gloves and smaller items go?

Notes on Classroom Design

B: Focus Area- Curriculum

1. Required Curriculum

a. Math

What math program has your school district adopted? Are there curriculum trainings being offered? Who can you ask if you have math specific questions? What materials have been supplied by the district/publisher? Is there a district or school provided pacing guide? How many minutes per day/ week are you required to teach math?

b. Science

What are you required to teach in science? What types of resources are available to you from the district, at the school, or within the community? How can you incorporate other subjects (e.g. reading, writing, art) into the science lessons? Who can you ask about science specific questions?

c. Social Studies

What are you required to teach in social studies? What materials have been provided? Are you able to include other subject areas into social studies (e.g. art, math)?

d. Art

What are you required to teach in art? Does your school have an art specialist? What materials are available for art projects at the district level or within the school? How can you incorporate other subjects into art?

Notes on Required Curriculum

2. Language Arts

a. Reading

What curriculum has your district adopted? Are you required to follow the curriculum or can you utilize other sources? How many minutes per day/week are you required to teach reading? What reading materials are available in your classroom, school, district, community? How will you structure your reading time to meet the needs of each student? Will students choose their reading materials or will you? How will you model reading and for what purpose?

b. Writing

What curriculum has your district adopted for writing? Can you use other sources? What are you required to teach in writing? How will you model writing?

Notes on Language Arts

3. Making it Interesting

a. Kinesthetics

What types of kinesthetic (movement) activities will you incorporate in the classroom? Will you have routine kinesthetic activities? How often will you have students moving? How could you include kinesthetic activities to help with transitions?

b. Materials

What types of materials will you create for your lessons? Are you creating something that could be found from another source?

c. Technology

How will you incorporate technology into the classroom? What resources are available? Are the activities done using technology reinforcing what has been taught in the classroom or are students learning from the technology?

Notes on Making it Interesting

C: Focus Area- Assessment

1. Required

What types of formal assessments are you required to conduct for the district or school? Will you include the formal and informal assessments in a final grade? How will you prepare students for the assessment? How will informal assessments guide your teaching practice?

2. Grades

How many grades will you include in each subject area? Are you required to have a specific number of grades in each subject? Will a project/ exam score be included in more than one subject area? In what format are you required to keep a grade book? Who can you ask with specific grade book questions? When are final grades due?

3. Frequency

How often are you going to assess student learning? What form will assessments take? Will students be able make corrections or modifications to their work after they are assessed?

Notes on Assessment

D: Focus Area- Parent Communication

1. Starting Out Right

How are you going to introduce yourself and your classroom to parents? How are you going to communicate your expectations for students to parents? What form(s) of communication are you going to use?

2. Conferences

What will parent/teacher conferences look like for you? Do you decide how long each conference is or is there a school policy? What norms are in place at your school for conferences? How are conferences scheduled? What will you be sharing with parents at conferences? Will you lead the conference or will students?

3. Tough Parents

What will you do when faced with an unhappy parent? Who can you talk to about difficult parent situations?

Notes on Parent Communication